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A PRICE ON THEIR HEADS

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"IN LESS THAN TWO MINUTES THE FRENCHMAN'S HANDS WERE TIED."

A PRICE ON THEIR HEADS

by

G. BELTON COBB

Author of

"THE MAN WITH THE BLACK PATCH" ETC.



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A PRICE ON THEIR HEADS

CHAPTER I

THE MISSED TRAIN

FOR Peter and Tony Munday, the excitement of their summer holiday began directly the train steamed into Newhaven. Tony, eager as he was to get to France, would have liked to stop and look at the ships in the harbour ; but Mr. Ratleigh (or "Old Rats," as the boys called him) refused to allow anything of the sort.

"Nonsense," he said. "Absurd nonsense. Come along, both of you, and keep close to me."

The ship in which they were to cross the Channel was the largest the boys had ever boarded, and the excitement of climbing the gangway almost made up for the disadvantage

of being still in the charge of one of the masters from their school on the first day of the holidays.

The boys' father and mother had been spending the summer in Switzerland, and Mr. Munday had written to say that they were moving to Concarneau, in Brittany, where they wanted Peter and Tony to join them. Their mother, he said, was travelling direct, but he would have to come home to fetch the boys at the end of the term. Peter and Tony were both delighted at the prospect of a holiday abroad, and Tony hunted out an atlas and discovered that they would have to cross the Channel from Southampton to St. Malo, which would mean a whole night at sea. That, he was sure, would prove the best part of the whole trip, and Peter, as soon as he had seen a photograph of one of the cabins, was quite ready to agree.

That had been the original plan. But a few weeks before the end of the term, Mr. Ratleigh, the modern languages master, being in an unusually amiable mood, had suggested

that, as he also was spending his holidays in France, he would be able to see them across the Channel. Tony, of course, had produced a number of reasons why the scheme wouldn't work, but Mr. Ratleigh's good humour had persisted, and he had accordingly written to make the suggestion to Mr. Munday, who had been delighted to accept it. Mr. Ratleigh, worse still, was going via Newhaven and Dieppe to Paris and Tours, as a preparation for starting down the shore of the Bay of Biscay to Biarritz; and consequently the longer sea-voyage was abandoned, and Mr. Munday agreed to meet them in Paris.

To the boys it was a great disappointment, Tony being particularly indignant because, although Peter used rather lazily to declare that "Old Rats" wasn't so bad if you stroked his fur the right way, Tony always disliked schoolmasters in general and Mr. Ratleigh in particular.

On the journey across the Channel, Mr. Ratleigh's presence certainly proved a draw-

back. He seemed to have a very firm idea of his duties, and repeated one of his favourite phrases—"Nonsense, absurd nonsense"—at every suggestion that they should look at the engines, make a tour of the ship, or get one of the officers to take them on to the bridge. His idea of crossing the Channel seemed to consist of wrapping himself in a rug and sitting in a deck-chair—a practice which rather commended itself to Peter, who liked deck-chairs, but which seemed utter waste of time to the more energetic Tony.

Always very sure of himself, Tony liked excitement, and when the ordinary events of the day did not provide him with enough of it he would set to work "to get things going." On the other hand, Peter, who was a year older, was much more tractable, and although—in the holidays at any rate—he shared in many of the adventures that Tony contrived, he came always under his younger brother's leadership—sometimes a trifle unwillingly.

Now, Peter refused to fall in with Tony's

whispered suggestion that they should "cut away when Rats isn't looking," and consequently the four-hour voyage proved much less interesting than it might have been. Still, in spite of that, there was a good deal to see, and Tony soon recovered his spirits when they came within sight of the shore. Mr. Ratleigh was a man of nearly fifty, but he was energetic and used his long legs to good purpose in hurrying off the boat, past the red-trousered officials on the quay, and into the Customs House. There his knowledge of French proved useful—rather to the disappointment of Peter, who had cherished a secret conviction that the extraordinarily nasal pronunciation which Mr. Ratleigh always insisted was Parisian would prove unintelligible to the natives of France.

When at last they climbed into the train and started for Paris, Tony became interested in running from one window to the other to look out on the town of Dieppe, thinking how funny it was to have a railway line through the main streets and close to shops

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and restaurants. But soon Mr. Ratleigh called to him to sit down.

“ Really, Munday Second,” he said, “ there is no need for all this excitement. The people of France are not curiosities to be stared at, and I shall be obliged if you will withdraw your head from the window. But if, on the other hand, it is the posters on the hoardings that interest you, I shall be pleased to hear you translate some of them.”

Tony muttered something to the effect that the holidays had begun.

“ That, I am glad to say,” answered Mr. Ratleigh, “ is true. In a few more weeks the society of you boys would have become intolerable. Quite intolerable. As it is, I shall soon have the pleasure of forgetting that such creatures exist as either Munday First or Munday Second. Particularly Munday Second. At present, however, I am still on duty, and I have to see that you do not over-tire yourselves.”

“ Nothing very fagging about sitting in a train, sir,” grumbled Peter.

“Not,” said Mr. Ratleigh, “for the first four hours. But your journey is to last a great deal longer than that. You will have your dinner, I believe, in Paris, and then at half-past nine you go aboard the train which is to convey you to Brittany. You will travel all night and most of the morning. Very tiring in any case, and it is my duty to hand you over to your father in good condition.”

They had tea in the restaurant car, and Peter, with whom Mr. Ratleigh's efforts during term-time had been fairly successful, was disappointed to find that the waiter could talk English: not, of course, that he would have risked talking French in front of “Rats,” but nevertheless Peter, who privately thought himself rather a dab at the language, had been looking forward to trying his skill at it, and had even declared that he meant on this holiday to do the talking for the whole family.

For the next two hours Mr. Ratleigh insisted on trying to improve the occasion by

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describing in French the things that he saw from the window, although neither Peter nor Tony thought that the occasion needed improvement—at any rate of that kind. Consequently, it was with a good deal of relief that they welcomed their father on the platform in Paris and heard him express his gratitude to “ Rats ” and finally say “ Good-bye.”

When Mr. Ratleigh had departed, gladly enough, to begin his own holiday, Mr. Munday suggested that as their train did not leave till half-past nine, they should see something of Paris and then have dinner at the Quai d'Orsai. They went first to the Arc de Triomphe, where the French “ Unknown Soldier ” is buried, and then drove down the Champs Elysées, Mr. Munday explaining what they saw in a way that was much more interesting than Mr. Ratleigh's.

Peter, now that Mr. Ratleigh could no longer criticise his pronunciation, was keen on showing off his French, and he suggested that he should give directions to the taxi-

driver. "What did you call the station?" he demanded.

"The Quai d'Orsai," said Mr. Munday, "or if you like you can call it the Gare d'Orléans." And—feeling that if you used a word like "Quai" you might just as well be talking English—Peter decided that the second name would do better.

Driving down the rue de Rivoli, they stopped for a few minutes to look into the Louvre, and then went to the cathedral of Notre Dame, where they spent some time in climbing the stairs of the towers to examine the curious gargoyles; so that by the time Peter had told the driver to go to the Gare d'Orléans, there was not much time to spare, and Mr. Munday said that they would have to be quick over their dinner.

Driving in a taxi through the streets of Paris was exciting in itself, for there appeared to be no speed-limit, no rules of the road, and very little direction of the traffic. To the boys it seemed that they were con-

tinually having the narrowest of escapes from collisions.

They were all looking out of the windows, when suddenly Peter noticed a clock.

“ I say,” he cried, “ doesn’t our train go at half-past nine ? We shall have to buck up. That clock says it’s ten past nine already ! ”

Mr. Munday looked at his watch.

“ It’s right, too,” he said. “ We ought to have reached the station twenty minutes ago.”

Leaning out of the window, he called to the driver to stop, and asked him in French why they hadn’t yet reached the Gare d’Orléans. The driver spoke so quickly and with so much excitement that neither Peter nor Tony could understand what he said ; but a minute later he shrugged his shoulders, turned the car, and set off faster than ever in the opposite direction, while Mr. Munday sat back on his seat.

“ That’s the result of relying on Peter’s French ! ” he exclaimed. “ The man insists

that he didn't say 'Gare d'Orléans,' but 'Gare de Lyons,' which is entirely in a different direction. It is really most annoying. I ought to have noticed where we were going, but I was too busy pointing out things to you boys. Now we shall be lucky if we catch the train. It will take us another ten minutes to get to the station from here, and then we have to take our tickets."

"And we've got to get our dinner," said Peter.

"That," answered his father, "is absolutely out of the question."

"Oh, I say!" cried Peter. "I'm jolly hungry, you know!"

"I do know," said Mr. Munday. "I am hungry myself. But it cannot possibly be helped. If Mr. Ratleigh had paid more attention to correct pronunciation and less to the tenses of irregular verbs, things might have been different. But as it is we shall have to get something to eat on the train after it has started."

By running down the stairs and along the

platform, they climbed into the train less than a minute before it started, the boys clambering in first, and Mr. Munday throwing the suit-cases on to the floor of the coach before he followed them.

“That was a squeak!” cried Peter, as he lifted one of the suit-cases on to the rack. “I say, let’s find the dining-car.”

Finding the dining-car should, of course, have been easy enough; but somehow it wasn’t, and it was only after they had twice walked the whole length of the train that the truth began to dawn on them. Then Mr. Munday found the guard of the train and interrogated him, while Tony waited eagerly, and Peter, finding it fairly easy to understand the slower French of his father, tried in vain to follow the Frenchman’s replies.

“Well,” said Mr. Munday at last, “I am afraid this is particularly unfortunate. There is no restaurant car on the train. We shall be able to get some breakfast at Vannes, where we change trains at seven o’clock to-morrow morning; but until then it seems

that we shall have to tighten our belts and make the best of it. I only wish we had thought of getting some sandwiches."

"Do you mean to say," cried Peter, "that we've got to jolly well starve?"

"I'm afraid that is about what it comes to," answered his father. "Unpleasant, of course, but I don't think it will hurt *you*, Peter. You can quite afford to lose a little weight."

Peter and Tony lay down on the seats and tried to sleep, while Mr. Munday sat in a corner, with his feet outstretched. To sleep, however, seemed impossible, and when at midnight the train stopped, Peter got restlessly to his feet and looked out of the window.

"Here's a station," he cried. "I say, couldn't we jump out and collar some food?"

"The refreshment-room is certain to be closed, and anyhow I don't suppose we shall stop for more than a couple of minutes," answered his father.

"Well, we might have a try," Peter

suggested, and Mr. Munday opened the window and leant out to speak to a porter.

Then he turned to the boys.

"The train waits here for five minutes," he said, "and there is a refreshment-room that remains open all night."

"Bravo!" cried Peter. "Come along."

Mr. Munday caught him by the arm.

"Wait a moment," he said. "The refreshment-room is on a farther platform, and that means going under the line by the subway. I am afraid there wouldn't be time."

"I know I could do it," cried Tony. "I can run much farther than that in five minutes."

"I dare say," answered his father. "But you would have to make your purchases at the other end and pay for them. And you might not be attended to immediately. Besides," he added, with a smile, "you might have some difficulty in making yourself understood."

"Tell you what," cried Peter, as the

cheering prospect of a meal threatened to vanish, "why don't you go, Pater? You could do it in the time, of course, and you could bring back sandwiches or something for us."

For half a minute Mr. Munday looked across the intervening rails, as if comparing the distance and the time available. Then he suddenly made up his mind.

"I think," he said, "that that will be the best plan."

Going along the corridor to the door at the end of the carriage, he ran to the top of the subway, while the boys stood at the door to watch him. The station was dark and the lights were much farther apart than they would have been in an English station, but for a second Peter saw his father under the light of a lamp as he emerged from the subway on to the farther platform.

Then for some minutes they lost sight of him, and at last Tony began to get anxious.

"Have to buck up," he cried. "Can't be more than a minute now before she starts."

"Oh, Pater will be all right," answered Peter, and suddenly they saw Mr. Munday on the other platform with a large paper bag in each hand.

"Near thing, this," cried Tony, and at that moment the guard of their train put his horn to his lips.

Excitedly, Peter called to his father to come straight across the rails. It was not likely that Mr. Munday could have heard him: but he seemed to get the same idea at the same moment, for he stopped, looked across the rails towards the train and then, turning his back on the subway, he hurried to the edge of the platform.

"Better get the door open," cried Tony, "so that he can jump straight in."

Neither of the boys had ever any clear idea of what happened in the next minute. Peter was looking down at the catch of the door-handle, and he pushed Tony away from the window as he did so. When they looked up again, Mr. Munday was not in sight. Nor was the farther platform on which he was

standing. Instead, they saw the swiftly moving, lighted windows of an express as it dashed through the station. And at the same instant their own train began to move.

Peter leaned out of the window and shouted.

“ Stop ! ” he cried. “ I say, stop ! Stop ! ”

But no one seemed to hear him or to pay any attention. The train gathered speed and drew out of the station. Suddenly Peter, leaning far out of the window in his excitement, saw his father appear up the steps from the subway, turn sharply, and stand staring at the vanishing train.

CHAPTER II

UNDER ARREST

PETER drew in his head from the carriage door and looked at Tony.

“ I say, this is a mess ! ” he cried. “ Hadn’t we better pull the alarm signal ? ”

Tony had shared his brother’s feelings of excitement and then of alarm when the train started before their father returned, but he recovered very much sooner. His father, he knew, was all right : there was not a bit of doubt about that. That being so, there was nothing to worry about, and the only thing to consider was how to make the most out of a situation that was already appearing to have first-class possibilities. Of course Peter wanted to stop the train and get out : that was the sort of idea you would expect from Peter, because he hadn’t any sense of adventure. But why should they stop the train

and get out? Much better fun, thought Tony, to go on by themselves. The journey would have been a bit of a lark in any case, now that they had got rid of "Old Rats," but on their own, making their way for goodness knows how many miles through a foreign country and having to make themselves understood in French—why, that would be jolly good fun!

After all, why shouldn't they? Pulling the alarm was a mug's game: not much fun in walking back to their father and then calmly going on by the next train! Whereas, if they went on now, right through to Concarneau, they'd have the adventure of the journey, and then, with any luck, get an hour or more to themselves.

That seemed pretty sound: only it wouldn't be any good putting it in that way to Peter. A thoroughly sound sort of fellow, Peter, of course, only not much good at stunts. He didn't funk them or anything of that sort, thank goodness, but he was just too jolly keen on being comfortable.

After all, they didn't know where they were going to stay at Concarneau, because that wasn't fixed the last time their father wrote, and if it was fixed now, he hadn't mentioned it in the three hours they'd had together in Paris ; so that if they turned up in the place alone they would have to hang about without knowing where to go. Jolly good fun, of course, that sort of thing, only Peter wouldn't think much of it, because he always hated camping out and things of that sort, and would want to be certain of a decent bed for the night.

Still, it was much too good a chance to lose, and Tony quickly decided that he'd have to persuade Peter to fall into line : and the way to do that was to convince him, somehow or other, that if he pulled the alarm he was going to be a lot more uncomfortable than if he went on. Easy enough to do that, provided you knew the way to handle the chap.

Tony therefore joined Peter at the window.

" Oh, all right," he said carelessly. " If

you like. Only we'll be in a worse mess if you do."

"No, we shan't," answered Peter, with his hand already half-way to the handle. "If this beastly train stops, we can get out and go back to Pater."

"We jolly well can't," said Tony. "We'd have to explain what had happened—and that'd take some doing in French, you know. Jolly obstinate crowd, French people. And even if they understood, they wouldn't believe it, and then they'd say we oughtn't to have pulled the cord, and they'd fine us five pounds. That's an awful lot in francs, about six hundred you know, now, and we've only got fifty francs each. Well, then they'd get annoyed and take us on with them, only they'd turf us out of here and shut us in the guard's van. Jolly uncomfortable, you know, being locked in the guard's van on a French train."

"Well," said Peter, hesitating, "but I don't see why they should. Couldn't we slip out before they came along, and go back?"

"Be worse off still, then," said Tony. "Train's going at sixty miles an hour, and we left the station a quarter of an hour ago. That's fifteen miles, and it would take them another two miles to pull up. Not much fun walking seventeen miles in the dark, you know."

"No," said Peter. "No. I don't want to do that. All the same, I don't see what we *can* do."

"Oh, that's easy enough," answered Tony. "Just stick here. Pater will know we're in the train all right, and he will come on after us by the next. We shall get to Concarneau for lunch to-morrow, and Pater'll turn up an hour or two later; perhaps the Mater will fetch up about the same time."

The word "lunch" recalled Peter to painful memories.

"What about food?" he said. "We can't stick it out till then without anything to eat. At least, I jolly well know I can't."

"Have to," said Tony. "Pater said we could get some breakfast at Vannes, and any-

way they won't give you dinner if you stop the train, and they'd probably make you miss your breakfast as well."

Peter began to see the soundness of his brother's arguments. He was usually more anxious about the present than the future, and inclined to let things slide as long as they were all right at the moment. Now, of course, they were not all right, because of the lack of a meal; but it seemed that they couldn't be improved, and meanwhile the possibility of lying down on the cushioned seat of the train seemed distinctly inviting.

"Oh, all right," he said, "only if we're going to stop here I vote we turn in and get some sleep. Getting on for one, you know. And we shan't feel so jolly hungry while we are asleep."

Tony quickly rolled his mackintosh into a pillow and lay at full length on the seat. He felt he could have fallen asleep immediately if Peter had not make such a row, pulling down his suit-case, opening it and fumbling inside.

“ Thought you wanted to get to sleep,” he said at last. “ Know I do. Why don’t you turn in and keep quiet ? ”

“ All right,” said Peter. “ I shan’t be a minute. I’m looking for my pillow. Oh, here it is,” and he drew out of his bag a red rubber air-cushion.

“ Can’t see what you want that thing for,” cried Tony, while Peter sat down and began blowing air into the nozzle of the cushion. “ Jolly sight better fun making the best of things. If we had to camp out, you wouldn’t sleep because you hadn’t got a bed and four blankets.”

“ I don’t want to sleep out, and anyway I bet I sleep better to-night than you do,” answered Peter, and as events proved, he was right. Tony found the cushions hard and his mackintosh made a very poor pillow, so that for the first hour and a half he was continually sitting up to refold it, while Peter slept soundly on the opposite side of the carriage.

At last, however, even Tony fell asleep, and it was with a start that he sat up several

hours later, to find the train at a standstill, and the early light of day streaming in through the windows. Some one was standing over him : a man in a rather untidy blue uniform and a small peaked cap. Tony blinked and rubbed his eyes, and then tried to make out what the man was saying.

“ I don’t understand—*ne sais pas, ne comprends pas*,” he answered at last.

The Frenchman did not seem satisfied. He stood in the middle of the carriage, shrugging his shoulders and gesticulating with both hands, while he poured out a flood of French, much too quickly for Tony to grasp what he meant.

The noise awoke Peter.

“ What’s the fellow want ? ” he demanded.

“ I don’t know,” said Tony. “ Can’t make it out. Talks so jolly fast. Suppose you have a go at him.”

Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, Peter stood up and caught the Frenchman by the arm.

“ *Qu’est ce que c’est que ça ?* ” he demanded.

He listened carefully to the reply, and then turned to Tony.

"He's saying something about our tickets," he said, "and something about cards of identity, whatever they are. I suppose he means passports. I say, have you got our passports and tickets?"

"Of course I haven't," answered Tony. "Pater kept 'em. Don't you remember his saying that we'd lose them? He's got them, about a couple of hundred miles away, I suppose."

Peter did his best to explain this to the Frenchman, but he didn't seem to meet with much success. The official looked suspiciously at him, then turned to the window, leant out, and called to another Frenchman on the platform outside.

"I say," cried Peter, "I believe they're going to make a fuss. That chap said something about a gendarme. I hope they won't run us in for not having tickets."

"Well," said Tony, "you'll have to explain about Pater. You're always swanking

about your French ; why don't you make the fellow understand ? *Notre père a les—* what's tickets ? ”

“ *Billets,*” said Peter. “ I've told him that, only it doesn't seem to help. He keeps on chattering about our cards of identity : says we've got to wait till they find out who we are.”

“ Looks to me as if he thinks we're spies,” cried Tony. “ Rather fun, you know, being locked up in prison : then we could work out a plan of escape, and get away, with lots of fellows chasing us and firing rifles at us. Jolly exciting, you know.”

“ Jolly beastly,” said Peter. “ I know I don't want to get locked up. I vote we get out of that other door and get away now, while the fellow isn't looking.”

Tony looked out of the window.

“ Not a chance,” he said. “ Half a dozen men over there, and we'd be spotted at once. Shouldn't even get out of the station. No, we'll have to let them take us, only we must keep our eyes open and make a dash for it

at the first decent chance we get. You leave it to me, and if I say 'handkerchief,' do the best sprint that's in you and follow me."

Before Peter could answer, the railway official withdrew his head from the window and opened the carriage door. Behind him, then, the boys could see a smart, military-looking man in a blue uniform with a cape.

The gendarme climbed into the carriage and looked the boys up and down without making any attempt to speak to them. Then he beckoned to them and climbed down to the platform. Peter looked inquiringly at Tony.

"Can't help it," said Tony. "Come along," and he picked up his suit-case.

The gendarme led the way through the station, with the boys close at his heels and the railwayman bringing up the rear. Tony looked to right and to left for a chance to break away, but it was clear that they were prisoners as long as the two men kept close to them. They went through the ticket office, and then the gendarme stopped to

unlock a door. Beyond it was a flight of downward stairs, and, standing aside, the gendarme signed to Peter to go down.

“Looks like a dungeon,” said Tony.
“Rotten sort of place to escape from.”

The steep wooden stairs led down to a cellar—a chilly, gloomy place that was unfurnished except for a large barrel that stood on two trestles in one corner. There was no light except that which came through a barred grating on the level of the ceiling; the walls were of white-washed brick, and the floor was of plain stone. Before the boys had reached the bottom of the staircase, they heard the door slammed behind them and the key turned in the lock.

CHAPTER III

ESCAPE !

“ NOT much of a place, is it ? ” said Tony, as he sat down on his suit-case.

“ I call it pretty beastly,” answered Peter. “ I don’t see why they should lock us up in this beastly cellar, even if we haven’t got any tickets. And I don’t see how we’re ever going to get out : not until Pater turns up anyhow.”

“ Have to get out before then,” said Tony. “ Might be a week before Pater finds us. He will think we’ve gone to Concarneau. Supposing he gets there this afternoon, it will take him the rest of to-day to make sure we aren’t anywhere about. And then he won’t know where we are. He will probably think that when we lost him, we got out at the next station, and he will go chasing back there. He will have to look

all along the line in case we started walking back to look for him, and it'll be a couple of days before he proves that we didn't get out there at all. Then he will have to try lots of other stations, and it'll be quite a week before he gets to this one."

"Well, but look here," said Peter, "we jolly well can't wait here a week. Not in this rotten cellar, you know. There aren't any beds !"

"Floor's all right," answered Tony cheerfully. "Bit hard, of course, but we shall soon get used to it after the first night or two. You've got that old pillow of yours, anyway, and you can spread out all your spare clothes and lie on them."

"No jolly fear," said Peter, and going up the stairs he began to hammer on the door with his fists, and then to see if he could not break it open by kicking the lower panels. The door, however, was solidly built, and when Peter took out his penknife and inserted the blade between the edge of the door and the lintel, he discovered that as

well as being locked it was bolted at top and bottom.

"It's no jolly use," he said then, but just at that moment he heard footsteps outside. The bolts were shot back and the key turned, and the gendarme opened the door.

Peter would have liked to make a bolt for it then and there, but the gendarme blocked the small space where the door was opened.

"I'll tell him to let us out," cried Peter, and he did the best he could with his French, making plentiful use of the verb "*sortir*." But the gendarme shook his head and began to shut the door. Peter therefore changed his tactics, and began to suggest that at any rate they wanted something to eat and drink. That, the gendarme seemed to think, was a different matter, and he assured Peter that food would be provided. Then once more he shut and locked the door.

"What's he going to do?" Tony demanded. "Did you make him understand?"

" Anyhow," answered Peter, " he's gone to get our breakfast."

Tony by now was as hungry as his brother, and a good meal seemed very welcome.

" Hope he brings us a nice lot," he said. " Plenty of bacon and half a dozen eggs : and I shouldn't mind a plateful of porridge."

" Well, I said '*s'il vous plait*' and all that," said Peter, " so he ought to do something pretty decent."

" Hope he does," said Tony. " Only don't you get too busy with the food directly he comes back, because you've got to keep your eyes open."

" More likely to keep my mouth open," cried Peter.

" All the same," said Tony, " we've got to watch what he does when he brings it, and see if there's a chance of getting out. He may leave the door open, you know. Only don't you cut and run, even if he does. We're not ready yet. Have to get everything ready first, you know, when you're

escaping: clothes and all that, and keep back a bit of the food."

"What, and not eat it all?" Peter demanded. "No jolly fear!"

"Anyhow," said Tony, "it's no good trying to get out till we see how things stand. Keep your eyes open now, and we may see a way to get clear when he brings our dinner."

Tony took up a position with his back to the barrel, from which he could watch the door, and even see through it if it was left open. A few minutes later, he heard the shooting of the bolts and the turning of the key, and then a man appeared carrying a tray. His hands being fully occupied, he tried to pull the door to with his foot, but the latch struck the lintel and it swung open again behind him.

As the man came down the stairs, Peter came forward to take the tray, while Tony climbed on to the top of the barrel to get a better view into the office at the head of the stairs.

“ I say ! ” cried Peter. “ This isn’t any good. I want bacon and eggs. *Œufs*.”

But though Peter called repeatedly for *jambon* and for *œufs*, the man didn’t seem to understand. He looked round the cellar for a place to put down the tray, and, finding nothing, he set it in the middle of the floor : a tray bearing two cups and saucers, a jug of hot coffee and another of milk, a couple of plates, two rolls, and two small pats of butter.

Catching the Frenchman by the arm, Peter pointed first at the tray and then at his open mouth, trying as he did so to put on an expression of extreme hunger—which, as a matter of fact, was not very difficult, for his hunger was very far from being assumed. But the man only shook his head and turned towards the stairs. Peter, in his disgust at being starved, would have liked to try to make a bolt for it, but he looked first at his brother, and Tony very emphatically shook his head.

“ Better than nothing,” cried Tony, as the

door was once more shut and locked ; “ only I wish you hadn’t made such a row. I wanted to listen so as to find out whether there was any one upstairs while that chap came down. Couldn’t hear anything, anyway, and when dinner comes we’ll have to chance it. Sling us over some coffee.”

“ I wonder what we shall get for dinner,” said Peter, with his mouth full of roll. “ Beastly poor fun, this sort of thing. I vote we raise no end of a dust when we get out.”

“ Well, leave us a bit of the butter,” said Tony. “ Now, look here. We’ve got to get everything ready, so that directly that chap comes again, we can cut up those stairs and get out of the station.”

“ I know I’m not going directly he comes,” answered Peter ; “ not till I’ve got through whatever he brings us for dinner.”

“ You’ll have to,” said Tony. “ By the time you’ve finished dinner, he’d have locked the door again. We shall have to take the dinner with us. Tie it up in handkerchiefs,

you know, and eat it outside. Now look here. Don't you talk so much, but just listen to me. We've got to get everything ready. We shall have to get the chap to turn his back on us and then jump on him. The question is, how are we going to get him into the right position ? ”

“ We can wait till he's going upstairs again,” suggested Peter.

“ Might do that,” said Tony, “ only if there *was* anybody in the office at the top of the stairs, we should be seen. Much better if we could get him into that corner. Tell you what ! He wanted somewhere to put the tray, didn't he ? All right. We'll make a table and put it in that dark corner under the stairs. Then we can make him go in there with the tray and tie him up.”

“ Where's the table coming from ? ” Peter demanded, looking round the empty cellar.

Tony got to his feet, and called to Peter to help him lift the barrel off its trestles. Then he placed these beneath the stairs and laid Peter's suit-case across them.

“ That’ll do,” he said. “ Pity we haven’t got an old sack,” he added. “ I suppose we shall have to use one of my spare shirts.”

“ I don’t see what you want that for,” said Peter. “ We can do without a tablecloth, can’t we ? ”

“ Don’t be an old goat,” cried Tony. “ It isn’t for a tablecloth : it’s to throw over the chap’s head. When he’s bending over the table with his hands on the tray, we come up, slip the shirt round his head and tie it behind him. That stops his shouting. Then we get hold of his hands and tie him up.”

“ That sounds all right,” said Peter, who, having finished his roll and coffee, was beginning to take an interest in Tony’s plan.

“ Have to tie everything pretty tight,” Tony went on, “ and then lock him in here when we get out, so that he won’t be found till we’ve had time to get a good distance away. We might as well do a bit of hammering on that door this morning and kick up no end of a row, so that if the chap unties himself and starts trying to get out, any one who hears

him will only think it's us and not pay any attention. Now look here," he continued "we shan't be able to take the suit-cases, you know, so we'd better decide what we're going to carry."

Peter couldn't see what was wrong with the suit-cases until Tony explained that they might be seen when they got to the top of the stairs. In that case, they would have to run, and they wouldn't have much chance if they had a lot to carry. Ever so much better if they wrapped a few things up in spare shirts or pyjama coats, made bundles and tied them round their necks by the sleeves : then they would have their hands free, in case it came to a fight.

The next hour was spent in deciding what was to be taken with them. Peter insisted on taking his air pillow, and his bundle, when finished, was considerably larger and more unwieldy than Tony's, for he would not go without two pairs of pyjamas, most of his spare underclothing, a travelling rug, his washing things, and an extra pair of trousers.

“Don’t see why you want all that,” cried Tony. He had taken off the smarter clothes in which he had travelled from England, exchanging them for a pair of grey flannel trousers, a cricket shirt and a belt, his flannel jacket, socks, and shoes. Then he put on his mackintosh, and began filling his pockets with washing things and handkerchiefs, and tying spare socks and a few other things into a bundle covered with a second shirt.

“Better bring a lot of handkerchiefs,” he suggested, “because we haven’t a towel. Must have an extra pair of shoes, too. Don’t see that anything else is wanted.”

Tony explained that they must keep the bundles and things out of the man’s sight when he came down, so that he shouldn’t be suspicious: but they could wear their mackintoshes, because it was cold enough for them in the cellar anyway, and then, when they’d got the chap properly tied up, they could snatch the bundles and clear out.

“And the grub,” Peter prompted, and Tony agreed. He fastened his spare shoes by their

laces to the back of the belt of his mackintosh, and then removed the belt, putting it with the bundles behind the old beer barrel.

When all their preparations were made, they spent part of the morning in making what Tony called "a good old row," in order to get any one who might be upstairs used to any noise the Frenchman would make when he was a captive ; and the rest in laying plans for getting out of the station, once they had won their way to the top of the stairs.

Suddenly Tony heard a sound overhead.

"Coming !" he whispered. " You get over there by our table and beckon the chap into the corner when he looks for somewhere to put the food. I'll come behind him, and then we'll pounce as soon as he gets under the stairs. I'm going for his head. You hang on to his arms and tie them together."

They heard the footsteps stop outside the door, and then the shooting of the bolts. The door opened. With an exaggerated expression of innocence, Tony began to whistle.

Peter stood ready near the table, his hands, holding Tony's braces, hidden behind him.

Excited as he was, Peter had time to notice the good smell of roast veal rising from the tray. Then he saw that the man was stooping to put the tray down on the floor. It seemed a good moment for the attack, and he looked inquiringly at Tony ; but his brother shook his head, for that part of the floor could be seen from the top of the stairs.

Tony tried to recall all his rather shaky knowledge of French.

" *Mettez la ici,*" he said.

The man looked up, but seemed in doubt till Tony took him by the arm and began to lead him towards the improvised table. Then the man stepped forward, and for the first time he smiled.

" *Ça va,*" he said.

He laid the tray on the top of the suitcase, bending over it exactly as Tony had expected. And at that moment Tony swung the shirt over his head and drew it tight across the man's face.

His arms went up immediately, and he might have been able to tear the shirt away, if Tony had not suddenly jerked him backwards so that, losing his balance, the man sat heavily on the stone floor. Then Peter came in to the struggle, seizing a wrist and tying the braces round it before he reached for the other arm, which was still pulling desperately at the shirt.

In less than two minutes the Frenchman's hands were tied, and Tony had slipped into his mouth a screwed-up handkerchief, tying it firmly in place as a gag with what was left of the shirt. Then both boys turned their attention to the man's feet, and very soon he was lying on the floor, gagged securely and bound hand and foot.

"Warm work," whispered Tony. "Come along," and he ran to pick up the belt of his mackintosh and his bundle of clothes.

"Half a minute," cried Peter. Stooping over the tray, he put the whole of the veal on to one plate and began to wrap it in a pyajma coat.

“ All right,” said Tony, “ only don’t take the gravy. Pour it on the floor ; otherwise it will drip all over the place and leave a trail to show where we’ve gone. That’s the way. Here, put it in my bundle : it isn’t so big as yours.”

The tying up of the food took longer than they had expected, for there were rolls of bread to be stuffed into Peter’s already over-filled pockets, as well as the tying up of the meat. But at last everything was ready, and they crept up the stairs. Tony hesitated at the top, listening intently to hear whether any one else was near, and at last putting his head through the doorway. The room into which the doorway opened was empty ; but an official might be somewhere about. Going on to all fours, Tony crept to the window and looked out.

The platform seemed deserted, but he could see three men busy loading a truck some distance away. A goods train stood on the line, but there was no engine attached to it.

Tony very quickly made up his mind what to do. Crawling back to the top of the staircase, he whispered to Peter to stand up and shoot the bolts and lock the door. Then the two boys crawled to the window.

“ Can’t get out by the door except through the ticket-office,” Tony whispered. “ Don’t know who’s there. Get out of the window and then follow me.”

Making as little noise as possible, they stood up and unlatched the window. Then they began slowly to raise the pane, but stopped immediately as the sash began to creak.

“ Have to risk it,” whispered Tony. “ No other way.” But at that moment fortune favoured them, for an engine on a farther platform suddenly whistled, and any squeak that the rising window may have made was drowned in the louder sound. Very cautiously, they both leant out, making sure that no one was in sight along the platform, and then Tony flung his leg over the sill.

CHAPTER IV

PURSUIT

DROPPING through the window on to the platform, Tony ran towards the standing goods train, to a space between two trucks. Then, ducking his head under the coupling, he knelt beneath the train and waited for Peter to join him.

“ Stop if you hear any one,” he whispered, and then he began to crawl on hands and knees over the sleepers, underneath the train. It was painful work, for the ground between the wood was covered with loose flints, and the couplings sometimes hung so low overhead that the boys struck their backs and shoulders. Still, they were completely hidden unless any one happened to look within a few inches of the ground, and they were able to make their way for some distance beyond the end of the station platform.

When they reached the last truck but one, Tony stopped.

"What do we do now?" Peter whispered.

"Don't know," said Tony.

"I know I jolly well want to stand upright," whispered Peter. "Jolly back-aching, you know."

"Shut up," Tony answered. "May be somebody about."

Lying flat on his face, he looked between the wheels of the truck, first on one side and then on the other. To the left, less than twenty yards away, he could see a man winding up a crane. To the right, stood a large iron shed. Turning therefore to the right, he began to crawl out of the shelter of the truck, keeping it carefully between him and the man at the crane.

It was a large shed, used apparently for storing hay, of which a large stack filled one corner. On to this the boys climbed.

"That's all right," said Peter. "Nice and soft. I vote we get outside some of that food."

Provided that they didn't make a noise with

the plate, Tony hadn't the slightest objection : but the meal, unfortunately, proved unappetising. The veal was now cold and greasy with the half-congealed remains of the gravy, and worse still, although they could cut it with their penknives, they found that as they had forgotten to bring the forks, it had to be eaten with their fingers. Nevertheless, much as Peter was disgusted with the method of eating, eating at all was good, since it was the first thing more substantial than rolls and coffee that they had had for nearly twenty-four hours.

" Now what ? " asked Peter, when he had finished the last morsel.

" Can't stay here, anyhow," answered Tony. " If that chap gets loose out of the cellar, they'll search everything within a mile or two of the station. Got to get on to Concarneau somehow—only we haven't got a map, and anyhow the place is probably about a couple of hundred miles away. Question is what we're going to do."

" Can't we get a lift in a cart or something,"

Peter suggested, "and go on to some other town and then take the train?"

"Might get a lift," Tony agreed. "Only I don't know about the train. How about paying for tickets? We've only got a hundred francs between us, you know, and that's less than a quid. We shall want some more food soon, and if we don't get a train at once, we shall have to put up for the night. A haystack will do for me—rather fun, you know: only I expect you'll want to go to an hotel. Wouldn't be much of our money left after that."

"Well, then," said Peter, "how about this? If we got to a town, we'd find a Consul or some one, shouldn't we? He'd let us have some money if we told him who we were, and then we'd get the train to Concarneau in no time."

"Not a bad scheme," said Tony, and for half an hour they discussed the best method of getting away from the station where at any moment their victim might reappear, thirsting for revenge. It seemed too risky to be

seen on a road close to the station, for even if the Frenchman did not escape for some time, there was of course the station gendarme to be reckoned with. At last they agreed that the best plan would be to walk through the fields, keeping parallel to the railway line, until they came to the next town : or, if they didn't come to a town pretty soon, at any rate until they had got far enough for it to be pretty safe to show themselves on a road.

Climbing down from the haystack, they went to the door of the shed. The trucks beneath which they had crawled had been drawn away and they could see the man with the crane still at work ; but none else was in sight. With Peter at his heels, Tony turned and ran along over the sleepers, meaning to get through the hedge and into the fields as soon as they reached the end of the station yard.

But when they were within a few yards of the hedge, Tony caught his foot in a signal wire and fell headlong. He cried out as he fell, and the sound attracted the attention of the man at the crane. As Tony picked him-

self up, the boys heard a shout behind them and looked back.

The man at the crane was no longer alone. At his call, two men had suddenly appeared, and now the group of three stood pointing at Peter and Tony and talking excitedly. Suddenly two of them began to run forward.

"It's the gendarme," cried Peter, "and the chap we tied up: he must have got out. I say, come along, they'll catch us!"

There was no need, however, for Peter to warn Tony, for he was already some yards ahead, running at full speed. Immediately in front, the railway line broke into two: one track, obviously the main one on which they had travelled from Paris, running straight ahead, while a single line branched off to the left. Without hesitating, Tony chose the single track, although he soon began to regret his choice, as, when it turned still more to the left, it began to rise at an appreciable gradient.

"Not a bit of chance if they catch us on this hill," he panted. "Better turn off somewhere."

Stopping while Peter ran to his side, he

looked back down the line. There was no one in sight, but the track was here on such a bend that it was impossible to tell whether their pursuers were a couple of hundred yards behind or almost within touching distance. In front, the slope seemed to straighten, and as he had now got back his breath, Tony led the way on at a run, repeating that they must turn aside as soon as they could. In a minute or two the track once again rose, and Peter, thoroughly exhausted, caught his brother's arm.

"Can't go any farther," he panted. "I must—get my—breath."

"You'll be caught if you do," Tony retorted, and then, seeing that Peter was in no condition to last more than another hundred yards at the most, he began to look for an open place in the hedge.

"Here we are," he suddenly cried. But before he could push aside the projecting twigs he heard the sound of an approaching train.

"Wait a second," he said. "If she's not going too fast we might get aboard."

Though they had not realised it, they were now almost on the brow of the rise, and the first thing they saw was the funnel of the engine, and then the roof of the cab, as it climbed the upward slope which would have been a downward slope for them if they had run another twenty yards.

Fearful of being seen, Peter flung himself through the hedge, and Tony scrambled after him.

"No use," cried Peter. "It's going the wrong way."

"Don't see that that matters," Tony whispered.

"But it would take us back to the station," said Peter.

"Doesn't matter," insisted Tony. "What we've got to do is to get away from here before those fellows catch us. If it takes us back to the station, we can get out again before they return, and anyhow there's a chance that the train might go right through and stop somewhere else."

Without giving Peter a chance of protesting,

he scrambled again through the hedge. The train was now half over the brow of the slope and still moving slowly. Running beside it, he swung himself on to the buffer, clutched violently at the corner of the truck as he nearly overbalanced on to the coupling, and then held out a hand to Peter.

“Steadily,” he whispered, and in a minute Peter was beside him, kneeling precariously. Standing on the buffer, Tony took hold of the top of the truck and hoisted himself over.

He found himself then on the floor of a half-filled coal-truck, sitting on some broken lumps, with his feet among the black dust. By the time Peter joined him, Tony was kneeling, with his eye to the join of two boards in the side of the truck. Urgently he signed to Peter to keep quiet.

Keeping quiet at that moment was not a thing that Peter did with any willingness. He badly wanted to talk, to give vent to his indignation. It was bad enough to have a cold, messy dinner and to have to run up a hill immediately afterwards: but this

business of sitting in a coal truck, and getting the dust all over you and into your hair, was the very limit. It took a good deal to arouse Peter, because losing his temper usually meant getting hot and excited, and that was the last thing that he ever wanted to do. But this—well, it *was* the limit. Even his mouth was full of bits of coal-dust! And then for Tony to be saying he mustn't talk!

But just before his indignation finally broke bounds, Tony sat up.

"That's all right," he said. "Got past 'em, both pretty well blown. I expect they'll give it up in the next quarter of a mile, and then they'll want a rest, so we ought to have plenty of time to get clear before they come back. I say," he added, "this is jolly good sport, isn't it?"

Peter, handkerchief in hand, was wiping the coal out of his mouth.

"I don't see anything jolly about it," he exclaimed. "Beastly dirty place, and I'm in no end of a mess. I wish we'd stayed on that lump of hay: that wasn't so bad."

“ Couldn’t,” said Tony. “ Had to get on.”

“ But we aren’t getting on,” grumbled Peter. “ We’re going back. In another two minutes we shall be back in that beastly station, and then I suppose we shall stop for the night. It looks to me as if we’re going to be worse off than if we had stayed in the cellar. We should have got our meals then, and the place *was* clean, anyway.”

Tony refrained from answering. He knew Peter well enough to know that an answer wasn’t necessary, and that his brother would be the best of good fellows again as soon as he got a hot meal and a sight of a comfortable-looking bed. That was the best of Peter. He didn’t often get ratty, but when he did it was nothing to worry about. You just let him talk himself out.

Only in this case it wouldn’t do for either of them to go on talking, because already they were drawing in to the station. Tony was hoping that the train would go through without stopping, and consequently he was disappointed when he felt the action of the

brakes. He did not dare look over the top of the truck, and he could see very little through the join of the boards: nothing, in fact, except a deserted stretch of platform and two rails and a sleeper beyond. He wondered whether the train would stay there, and whether if so the gendarme and the other man, when they returned, would think of searching it. If they did, the game was up; and even if they didn't, there wasn't much chance of getting out until the night, and that wouldn't be for another seven hours. Seven hours in that truck were'nt likely to be much fun, and in all probability Peter at any rate would get sick of it and would insist on making a dash—which would probably mean their being seen again and caught. Still——

A sudden jolt threw him off the lump of coal on which he was sitting, and as he scrambled to his feet he realised that the wheels were turning and the train was slowly drawing away from the platform.

CHAPTER V

LYING LOW

AFTER passing through the station, the train left the main track and turned on to a single line—the continuation, presumably, of that on which it had been running when the boys boarded it. High banks, topped by hedges, stood on either side of the line, and, although the boys no longer hesitated to stand up and look over the side of the waggon, they could get no idea of where they were going.

Still they were at any rate now out of reach of the gendarme and his friend, and there seemed no need to worry about them any more. Tony, as usual, set himself to make the best of things, moving two large lumps of coal till they formed a seat with a low back. Then he sat down and turned to Peter.

“ May be here for hours,” he said ; “ better make yourself comfortable.”

"I wish we'd got some water," Peter answered, and when Tony insisted that trying to get clean was a waste of time, because they were bound to get black again when they climbed out of the truck, he wanted to know when that was going to be.

"It seems to me we're pretty well lost," he said. "The main line may have gone on to Concarneau, but I'm jolly sure this one doesn't, and in that case, where does it go? I don't believe it goes anywhere."

"Must do," said Tony.

"Well, you know what I mean," said Peter. "What we want is a decent-sized town. This old train is probably going to a coal-mine, and what's the use of that? I vote we get out."

"Break your neck if you do," answered Tony. "Have to wait till the thing slows down, anyhow. Besides, we can't get out till it's dark."

"I don't see why not," Peter expostulated. "There's no one to see us here."

"No," said Tony; "but even if the train went slowly enough, we should land in the

middle of nowhere, and you said yourself that we haven't the slightest notion where we are. We can't go back because of the gendarme, and if we're going on, along the railway line, we might just as well let the train take us instead of having to walk. What we've got to do is to stay here till we get to another station and then get out. Only we can't get out in the daylight, because then we'd get run in again for not having tickets and all that. We shall be all right here till it gets dark, and then when the train stops at a town we can get out without being seen."

"Yes," said Peter, "I suppose that's all right. But what are we going to do then?"

Tony hesitated. He was not in any doubt as to what he wanted to do. The adventure that he had planned in the Paris train was turning out quite differently from the way he had expected—but then adventures never did turn out as you expected, and that was where the adventure came in. It was all jolly good fun, anyhow, and though of course they'd have to see this Consul chap and then

get on to Concarneau, to-morrow would be quite early enough for that. Meanwhile, they'd find somewhere to spend the night.

Left to himself, Tony would have slept in the open. Jolly good fun, he thought, waking up and looking at the stars, and being all alone, and not knowing who might come along, and all that. But Peter, of course, wouldn't be much use on that sort of stunt—and if it came to that, there *was* a good deal to be said for going to an hotel where they could get a first-rate meal and a decent bed. Last night hadn't been any too good.

"I don't see why we shouldn't have a quiet night," he said. "Put up at an hotel, you know, and then find the Consul in the morning, get the money, and push on to Concarneau."

The prospect of a comfortable hotel and a really sound meal very nearly compensated Peter for the discomforts of the moment, and, following Tony's advice in the manufacture of a seat, he began to think out what he would like for dinner. Sitting and thinking, however, always seemed a poor amusement to

Tony, and he soon suggested that they should have some sort of a game. A half-filled coal-truck, he insisted, wasn't really such a bad place to spend the day if you knew how to make the most of it, and soon Peter was as interested as his brother in a game which consisted of throwing small pieces of coal at a bull's-eye scraped on the end of the truck, with scores for bulls, for inners, and for outers. Peter never beat his brother at any sort of game, and yet he hated to lose; and, consequently, it was not until the score stood at two hundred and sixty to Tony and two hundred and three to Peter that the game was at last abandoned.

By that time it was five o'clock. The train had stopped at two stations, waiting nearly three-quarters of an hour at each, while additional trucks were attached and others removed: and while that was happening, of course the boys had had to leave their game and lie quiet in fear of discovery. At half-past five, just as both the boys were beginning to realise that they were missing their

tea, and had had precious little to eat and drink in the last thirty hours, the train stopped once more, and this time it was their truck that was removed from the rest.

Somebody banged on the side of the waggon and an engine was backed against its buffers. There was the sound of the joining of a coupling, and then, while the boys lay face downwards, hoping that if any one happened to glance into the truck their bodies might be mistaken for pieces of sacking, they were drawn on to a siding.

Cautiously, when the engine had uncoupled and steamed away, they put their heads over the side, and discovered that no one was in sight. Their truck stood by itself, and the rest of the train, thirty yards away, shielded them from any one who might have looked in their direction.

“ Good enough ! ” cried Tony, and he and Peter scrambled over the side and dropped to the ground.

The station yard was surrounded by a fence, in which stood an open gate only a few yards

from the truck. Through this they went, and then, leaving the road, they turned through another gate into a field and sat down close under the hedge.

"Can't go to an hotel like this," cried Tony, and he began to wash his hands in the muddy water of a ditch and then to brush off as much of the black of the coal as he could from his clothes. Even then, both he and Peter looked pretty disreputable. Peter's linen collar showed as much black as white, while Tony's flannel shirt was all over streaks and smudges.

Peter, who always liked to look smart and tidy, tried hard to improve his appearance, but without much result.

"I don't see what we can do," he grumbled. "If we go to an hotel like this, they'll take us for a couple of tramps and refuse to let us in."

"Oh, that's all right," answered Tony. "You can start by lending me your waist-coat. Your shirt's clean enough, but I've got to cover mine up. Then you turn your collar inside out, and we shall have to do something to these bundles."

The change of clothes made a surprising difference. It is true that there was a black mark on Tony's shirt which he could not hide, even though he purposely wore his necktie at a crooked angle ; and that Peter's collar had got badly crumpled in the process of turning. Still, there was no reason why they should not pass as ordinary guests in an hotel—or at any rate there wouldn't have been, if they had carried suit-cases instead of bundles.

They set out briskly up the hill, in the direction of the church whose spire they could see against the skyline. Soon they reached a few outlying cottages, and then they came to the main street. Most of the shops were shut, for it was now seven o'clock.

" I tell you what," cried Peter suddenly, as they passed a post office, " why shouldn't we send a telegram ? "

" Whom to ? " Tony demanded.

" Oh, I don't know," said Peter. " Might send it to somebody."

" Couldn't," answered Tony. " Can't send

it to Concarneau, because we don't know where we are going to stay. No use sending it to the Head, because he doesn't know where Pater is, any more than we do. And I don't believe he would send us any money, on a telegram, because he's the sort that would think it a fake."

"Oh, all right," said Peter, who felt much too tired to argue, even if there had seemed anything to argue about; "I don't care. I wish we could find this hotel, though. I do jolly well want some dinner."

Certainly, the town to which they had come did not seem the kind of place to which a lot of tourists go, for there was a marked shortage of hotels. It seemed smaller, too, than they had expected, consisting of only a single street which stretched for nearly half a mile. It was not until they had walked to the end of this and most of the way back again that Tony suggested that they should make inquiries, and then Peter felt too weary to remember his French. At last, however, they found a small boy who

understood their question, and then learnt to their dismay that the only hotel the little town possessed was at the bottom of the hill which they had just climbed, and facing the station.

By this time Tony was as tired as Peter, and the long walk back down the hill seemed particularly unattractive. Still, there was no help for it, and it was something to have been assured that there really was an hotel only ten minutes' walk away. Tony trudged on ahead, trying to revive his failing spirits by whistling, and turning round every now and again to encourage Peter.

"I vote for a bath first thing," he said. "A good hot bath each and then a meal. What shall we have?"

Peter's idea of the kind of meal that the circumstances warranted consisted largely of steak-and-kidney pie, potatoes and batter pudding, followed by suet roll; and the anticipation of such a feast made him step out more vigorously. Past the field where they had tidied their clothes and along the

road they went, until they saw before them the hotel. It was a square-looking stone building, painted red, with the words "HOTEL DE LA GARE" in dirty letters across the front. Its door stood invitingly open, and on the pavement outside it stood a number of chairs and small round tables.

"Hurrah!" cried Peter. "I say, let's have our meal out here. Rather fun, you know!"

"Right you are," cried Tony, and he threw his coal-stained bundle on to a chair. "You go in and order something," he said.

But as Peter got to his feet, a man at a neighbouring table suddenly looked up.

"What an affliction!" he exclaimed. "It's Munday First and Munday Second!"

CHAPTER VI

PLACARDED !

AT any other time the boys, and Tony especially, would have been extremely indignant at the idea of being unable to get away from schoolmasters even on a holiday. But now, when Peter was nearly dead beat and convinced that they were completely lost, and when even Tony was beginning to think that adventuring wasn't all fun because you got so jolly fagged, it seemed good to meet some one they knew—even Mr. Ratleigh.

Besides, this wasn't the "Old Rats" to whom they were accustomed. It certainly wasn't the neat, almost primly dressed man who punished them for mistakes in irregular verbs, and whom they had left on the Paris platform a little more than twenty-four hours ago. Mr. Ratleigh was now dressed in a

rough holiday suit of very pale green, brown canvas shoes, and a cricket shirt open at the neck. He was smoking a pipe, and had the complete air of a holiday-maker.

He smiled as the boys looked down at him.

"You don't," he said, "appear to have got to Concarneau. I strongly suspect that Munday Second is leading his elder brother into mischief. The natural thing, of course, on a holiday. Never mind," he added, as Tony appeared to be about to offer an explanation. "You can tell me all about it later. At present, I should advise a wash—or if you prefer it, baths. Curiously enough, there is a bath here. Unusual, you know, in small French hotels. And then dinner. Quite a good menu to-night. Is Munday First having any success in talking French?"

Tony laughed, while Peter, remembering the taxi-driver in Paris, looked uncomfortable.

"Ah," said Mr. Ratleigh; "was it the accent or the irregular verbs? Probably both. Never mind. I refuse to talk 'shop' in this quaint but exceedingly dull little town

where I am trying to forget that I am a schoolmaster. A difficult task when you fellows come blundering along. Never mind. Go and make yourselves presentable and then tell me all about it."

Mr. Ratleigh led the way into the hotel and soon made himself useful by explaining to "Madame" what the boys wanted. "Madame" appeared to be the proprietress of the hotel. She could talk no English, but in spite of that it was easy to make friends with her, for she smiled at everything that was said and seemed very anxious to make the boys as comfortable as possible. She showed them to their bedrooms and then led the way to a tiny, windowless room, which seemed to serve the double purpose of lumber-room and bathroom.

Half an hour later, feeling greatly refreshed, the boys came downstairs, and found Mr. Ratleigh awaiting them.

"I've told Madame to put you at my table," he said: "or rather to put me at yours. At lunch I listened to the conversa-

tion of four French commercial travellers. Very tiresome. Even the chatter of Munday First and Munday Second will be a welcome change. Now then, sit down and attend to your food. It would be better, too, if Munday Second refrained from staring at Madame's hair: I know it makes her resemble a golliwog, and, after the church, it is the only thing worth seeing in this town, but it has to be looked at discreetly."

The dinner was certainly good. There were seven courses, and after the first four, Peter and Tony began to feel much more alive. Tony, as he lay in the hot bath upstairs, had wondered what "Rats" was doing here and especially what would happen now that they had met him. He might, of course, insist on taking charge of them until Pater turned up, which would spoil all the fun and be a beastly nuisance. On the other hand, there was just a chance that, as Peter suggested, he would be a sport about it all. Much more likely, though, in Tony's opinion, that he would spoil everything.

Mr. Ratleigh, however, seemed to be chiefly intent on enjoying himself. He told them while they ate that he had come to the town that morning, in order to see its wonderful church, and that he would go on to the coast two days later and turn south towards Biarritz. Then, while Peter ate a peach and Tony wrestled with a strange, hard fruit which proved at last to be a green nut, he asked what they were doing without their father.

Between them, they told him the whole tale. Tony would have kept back a good deal of it, but Peter seemed to have made up his mind that "Rats" wasn't going to give any trouble and that he might even be a help.

"H'm!" said Mr. Ratleigh when they had finished. "Not exactly laudable, and I expect that if the truth were told we should find that Munday Second has done his best to improve the occasion. His arguments against stopping the train don't appeal to me as exactly sound. Still I don't expect he intended you to be locked in that cellar, and there I

sympathise with his desire to escape. At the same time, you have certainly committed a crime in assaulting the unfortunate man who was bringing you your dinner. I don't know if you appreciate the seriousness of that, but it *is* serious, and you'll be lucky if you don't find yourselves in trouble over it."

"But," exclaimed Tony, "we had to get out. They hadn't any right to lock us up."

"Perhaps not," answered Mr. Ratleigh. "I know that French railway officials do lock people into waiting-rooms when tickets are not produced, although not usually into cellars. I expect they saw that Munday Second was the kind of fellow to try to escape. But that's not the point. Whether you were justified in trying to escape or not, you certainly had no right to assault that man, and you must remember that, as these are State railways, he was a Government official. That makes the crime all the more serious. You've been lucky in getting fifty miles from the scene of your adventure, and we must hope that they won't be able to find you.

You will have to tell the whole story to your father, and I imagine he will take you out of the country at once, just in case the French authorities start looking for you."

" Jolly good lark if they do start looking for us," cried Tony.

" You won't think so," said Mr. Ratleigh, " if you are put into prison. I can assure you that this is really serious. In any case, I imagine you are safe enough for the moment, but the sooner you get to Concarneau and your father the better."

" Can't, till to-morrow," said Tony, and when Mr. Ratleigh demanded why, it was Peter who answered.

" We haven't anything like enough money for the tickets," he explained. " We're going to find the Consul and get some off him."

" If," said Mr. Ratleigh, " you expect to find a British Consul in a town of this size, you are likely to be disappointed. At least I should think so. You had better make inquiries early in the morning. If there isn't a Consul, what are you going to do ? "

“How far is it, sir?” asked Tony, and Mr. Ratleigh assured him that walking was out of the question. The only possible way was by train, and that certainly meant a good deal of money.

“I suppose,” he said, “that I shall have to supply you with that money. But I have not very much. My bank is sending supplies to meet me at various places on my route, and I am not prepared for an emergency of this kind. Not at all. You had better walk up to the town to-morrow morning and make certain about that Consul. If he doesn’t exist, I shall have to be responsible for you.”

“Jolly decent of you, sir,” said Peter, and indeed it was already clear that “Old Rats” on a holiday was quite different from the schoolmaster whom they knew in class. He seemed to have changed his character with his clothes, for he chatted away during that evening, telling stories of his own adventures on previous holidays until even Tony began to realise that out of school he was quite a good sort. They spent the evening sitting

at a table on the pavement outside the hotel, and beyond telling them that that was called the *terrasse*, Mr. Ratleigh even refrained from talking French. Indeed, he seemed anxious to forget that he had ever taught the language, and showed that he was quite as keen on holidays as they were.

At ten o'clock, Peter and Tony went upstairs to bed, and by the time they awoke next morning they had both recovered from their fatigue. Peter had begun once more to talk of all that he meant to do at Concarneau, while Tony was already regretting that the excitements of the last two days were coming to an end. Breakfast threatened to be a disappointment, but Mr. Ratleigh summoned Madame, and soon the coffee and rolls were supplemented with fried eggs, toast, and marmalade.

After breakfast, Mr. Ratleigh said that he particularly wished to spend the morning visiting a ruined abbey in the neighbourhood. If, he suggested, Munday First thought that he could ask the way without being com-

pletely misunderstood, they had better go by themselves to the Town Hall, or *Mairie* as it was called, and ask whether or not a British Consul lived in the town. Then he would meet them at the hotel for lunch and arrange their future plans.

Peter was quite sure that he could manage in French a simple job like that, and accordingly, leaving their bundles in their rooms, the boys set out for the town. They climbed the long hill, and then learnt that the *Mairie* stood in the centre of the town, close to the church.

As they went down the road, Peter suggested that they should spend some of their money on chocolate, and they went into a confectioner's. The woman behind the counter stared at them so hard that even Tony began to feel uncomfortable.

"What's she want?" he demanded. "Haven't got spots on my face, have I?"

"I don't know what she's after," Peter answered, as they left the shop. "She kept on looking first at you and then at me, and

then down at some paper she had behind all those bottles of sweets."

"Jolly funny, anyhow," said Tony, and then, as they came to the outside of the Mairie—a new-looking stone building with iron railings and a large notice-board—he asked Peter what he intended to say.

"What's the French for a consul?" he demanded.

"I don't know," answered Peter. "I ought to have asked 'Rats,' only I forgot. We might try something about *la représentation Britannique*. I expect they'd guess what I meant, even if it isn't right."

They were standing close to the notice-board, and while his brother was speaking, Tony began carelessly to try to make out what the printed posters said. Most of them were headed with the word "AVIS." Some were entirely unintelligible to Tony, but in others here and there he translated words which showed that they referred to such things as vaccination, and the registering of sheep and cows. Suddenly his eye was caught by a

small poster in one corner, cleaner than the rest, as if it had only just been posted.

"I say," he cried, "what's all this? There's the word 'munday.' Didn't know that meant anything in French."

"It doesn't," answered Peter. "At least I don't think so. Let's have a look."

Standing beside his brother, he began to read the notice. Again there was the word "AVIS!" and then something about "Republique Français." Down below were words which Peter slowly translated.

"It's something about a reward," he said. "They're offering two thousand francs. That's a couple of hundred pounds, isn't it?"

"About that," said Tony. "But what I want to know is where that word 'munday' comes in. Let's read as much as we can of the thing. I want to get the hang of it."

Many of the words on the poster were unintelligible to the boys and they were quite unable to decide what it referred to, until they came to the name—printed in capital letters—which had first caught Tony's eye.

There, clearly enough, were the words :

PETER CHARLES
MUNDAY,
enfant de quatorze ans
et
TONY BRIAN GASCOYNE
MUNDAY,
enfant de treize ans.

“ I say,” cried Tony, “ that’s us, you know.”

“ My word ! ” cried Peter. “ What does it mean ? ”

“ Means that they’re getting on to our track, as ‘ Rats ’ said they would,” said Tony. “ Come on : we’ll have to get out of this jolly quick and hide somewhere.”

Peter came willingly enough. He had been a good deal alarmed, the previous evening, to find that “ Rats ” looked at the matter so seriously. Even allowing for the fact that schoolmasters always do look at things seriously when any sensible fellow would take them as jokes, still it was going to be pretty

beastly if they really did get the police after them and then had to go to prison. Now all that seemed to be coming true. Bills were posted on the hoardings about them, and at any moment they might be stopped and arrested. Without a doubt, the woman in the sweet shop had had one of those notices and that was why she had stared at them.

Tony still seemed to think it rather "sport," but then Tony was a chap who never did take things seriously. Not indeed that they had ever come up against things that seemed quite so serious as this. Why, if they got arrested, anything might happen ! According to "Old Rats," the French would have an awful down on them, and they might get locked up for years. Peter turned up his coat collar, in the hope that it would hide some of his face, and he stuffed his school cap into his pocket. He hadn't stopped to see how closely the placard described them, but even if the gendarme and the other man hadn't got that quite right, they would be certain to have known that they were English and how they were dressed,

and of course a couple of English fellows in France looked pretty conspicuous.

“ I vote we get out of this street and into the country,” Peter suggested, and they took the first turning they came to and soon reached the fields. They broke through a hedge and tramped as quickly as they could across open country till they saw a wood on their left. It was thickly surrounded by barbed wire, and Tony tore one leg of his trousers in getting over, but that kind of thing, as he said, didn’t matter now.

“ Better shin up one of these trees, where no one will see us,” he suggested, “ and then we’ll have a council of war.”

They found a tree that was easy to climb, and perched themselves in a fork of its branches.

“ Now, then,” said Tony, “ this is all right, isn’t it ? I thought things were going to get pretty dull : getting shunted on to Concarneau, you know, and then carted back to England for the rest of the holidays. But this is all right. Can’t go on to Concarneau now,

because of course we'd be stopped at the station. Have to hang about here and hide."

"I don't see much fun in that," said Peter. "I jolly well wish we could get back to England."

"Rather not," cried Tony. "I say," he added suddenly, "where do you think those fellows got our names from?"

"What?" said Peter. "Oh! I don't know. Yes, I do though. They've got our suit-cases. We had those snapshot albums that the Mater sent us: she stuck all our names in the beginning, you know, and then I had that book that Pater gave me, with something about my fourteenth birthday in it."

"Right-oh," said Tony, "I expect that's it. Anyhow, the question is, What are we going to do? All very fine for you to say you want to get back to England, but how are you going to do it? You can't go by train and it's too far to walk. You can't even get to Concarneau."

"How about getting 'Old Rats' to help us?" Peter suggested.

“ Can’t,” said Tony. “ That woman in the shop knew all about us, and by this time the people at the hotel will have found out, too. Expect they’ll have half a dozen policemen there waiting for us. Not much sense in walking right into them. I vote we give that hotel a pretty wide berth.”

“ What are you going to do then ? ” Peter demanded.

“ Got an idea,” said Tony, “ anyway. Can’t stop here, because we haven’t any food. So we’ll have to be getting along. I thought we might find some small village where they wouldn’t have heard about us, then lay in a lot of food with all our money, and carry it somewhere and hide.”

“ Beastly job carrying it,” said Peter.

“ Come to that,” exclaimed Tony, “ what about our kit ? Can’t live for no end of a time without any spare clothes, you know, and we left everything at the hotel. We’ll have to hang about here for to-day and get round to the hotel after dark. Then we’ll break into the place in the night and get our things.”

CHAPTER VII

IN THE NIGHT

TONY had a good deal of difficulty in getting Peter to agree to his scheme for breaking into the hotel. It is true that Peter wanted his clothes. He hated the idea of having to live for goodness knew how long with only the things he was wearing : for that matter he hated the whole scheme of having to hide, although on the other hand, when Tony challenged him to go down to the station, he was quite sure he wasn't going to do that.

But Peter said the burglary scheme was silly. He said it would only make things worse, because they were certain to be caught, and then they'd be punished for that, as well as for tying up the Frenchman in the station. Why shouldn't they hang about till " Rats " went for a walk, or came out to look for them, and then get him to bring them their things ?

“ Not a bit of good,” said Tony. “ For one thing, we’d have to go pretty near to the station to spot him, and then we might get spotted ourselves. And anyhow, how do you know that ‘ Rats ’ would help ? Seemed ready enough this morning, but if he knew about that notice, he might say it was his duty to hand us over. Different, you know, now they’re actually after us. ‘ Rats ’ would probably say that it wasn’t any good hiding when everybody in the country was looking for us, and he’d probably promise to get us set free afterwards, and then we’d be locked up and he wouldn’t get us out after all. Not a bit of good going to him ; but we’ve got to get hold of our things, and then we’ll lie low till Pater turns up.”

Peter let himself be persuaded, not very willingly, and more because he didn’t know what else to suggest than because he approved of Tony’s plan. Then Tony suggested that they had better spend most of the day in finding a village where they could buy some food, and also in finding a decent sort of hiding-

place. Accordingly, they left the wood and started across country, with the town behind them.

When they had walked a couple of miles, they came to some cross-roads and a signpost which said that a place called Romagne was only two kilometres away—a mile and a quarter. The direction of the road that led to it would bring them a little nearer to the hotel, and that seemed all to the good, for it meant less walking when they set out on their midnight expedition. They continued through the fields, therefore, parallel to the road, until they saw the spire of a church a little way ahead. It was necessary to use a good deal of caution, and therefore they first walked all round the outskirts, discovering that it was quite a small village, with not more than forty houses.

“Just the place,” said Tony. “The question is whether they’ve got those notices yet. Don’t expect they have, because there isn’t a railway here, and they wouldn’t get on to a little place like this all at once. Might have a

look round and see if anything's posted up. If we get spotted, we'll have to cut and run, but otherwise we'll find a shop and lay in a good store of grub."

In the village, a workman with a straw in his mouth looked at them casually and wished them good morning ; an old woman in a doorway called off a dog that ran to sniff at their ankles ; but no one else took any notice of them. The only notice-board that they could see was that outside the church, and it certainly bore nothing that referred to them. Feeling emboldened, therefore, they looked for a shop, and at last found a tumble-down cottage with two doors, one of which opened into a wineshop and the other into a sort of general store. Going to the store, the boys spent some time choosing what they wanted, but at last they emerged with a tin of dry biscuits, some tinned milk, two pounds of tea, several kinds of tinned meat, and some bottles of cider ; also a small kettle and two mugs.

Peter protested that it wasn't much use

buying tea if they'd nothing to make it with except the cider, but Tony argued that they were certain to find a well or a stream or something of the sort, and cider was a jolly decent drink, anyhow. They found it difficult to carry everything, but although tins of meat and milk dropped continually and had to be recovered, they managed at last to stagger along the road and into the fields.

“ That's all right,” cried Tony ; “ now we've got to make a dump. Put all the stuff somewhere and hide it, you know, and then come back for it when we've got our clothes. Question is, where ? ”

Peter thought that they must be quite two and a half miles from the hotel, which would mean a jolly long trek in the night : besides, if the notices turned up at that village, people would know they'd been there and start looking for them, and then it wouldn't do to be too near the place. Tony agreed, and shouldering their burdens once more, they went back to the outskirts of the village and asked the man with the straw to direct them to the

town. They did not understand very much of what he said, but at least they could follow the direction in which he pointed, and accordingly they started off through the fields, having considerable difficulty every time they came to a hedge.

When they had walked for more than a mile, they could see a large cluster of roofs and the church spire in the distance, and then Peter voted for a halt.

"I don't want to carry all this stuff any more," he cried. "I vote we stick it down somewhere."

On their right was a small stream, and twenty yards farther on a road crossed it, built on rough stone arches. These were set back a couple of feet on either bank and the space between the stone and the edge of the bank seemed an excellent hiding-place. There, then, they left the various bottles, tins, and packets, covering everything with grass which they pulled up by its roots in a neighbouring field. When they had finished, the dump, from a distance, looked quite

like a grass-covered mound, and it was only when one peered under the bridge that it looked suspicious.

It was now nearly two o'clock, so dinner was started : tinned beef, biscuits, and cider. After the meal, there was nothing to be done till dark ; the boys sat under the bridge, throwing stones into the stream and trying to think of ways of passing the time. They both—and Tony especially—felt rather bored at the prospect of an eight hours' wait, but there was no help for it. To have come out into the open would have meant risking being seen, whereas under the bridge they were safe enough provided they didn't talk. Tea occupied some time, and then they undressed and bathed in the stream, having a good deal of bother afterwards in getting dry, with only their pocket handkerchiefs as towels.

At last, however, the sun set. Tony insisted on waiting till it was really dark, and when at length they started it was impossible to see more than a few yards, so that hedges proved more than usually difficult obstacles,

and on one occasion Peter had a narrow escape of falling into a stream.

Still, they made their way slowly forward, leaving the town well on their left so as to avoid it and reach the station. They soon reached the embankment on which the railway ran, and, keeping close to this, they crept on until the building of the station loomed before them. Then they came out on to the road.

The little tables and chairs still stood on the *terrasse*, but the front door was locked and the windows shuttered. The boys' rooms were on the first floor, at the back.

No one was in sight in the street, but Tony whispered to Peter that they had better not hang about.

"Can't possibly get in here," he said. "Come along," and he led the way down a narrow passage that ran at the side of the house. Some yards down this passage the house ended, but the wall continued, six feet high.

"Better give me a leg up," whispered Tony, and when Peter bent forward he

climbed on to his back and got his hands on to the top of the wall.

“ Bit higher,” he whispered, and then, as Peter stood upright, he flung up his leg, and a second later was sitting astride the wall. “ Have to undo a door for you,” he said, and then he dropped on the farther side of the wall.

Tony found himself in a large yard, with the back windows of the hotel on one side and the closed door of the garage on the other. Creeping forward on tiptoe, he examined the ground-floor windows. All were shut and, what was worse, shuttered like those in the front of the building ; still, as he looked up he could see that the shutters of many of the first-floor windows were pushed back, and he decided that they could get in there, if only they had the luck to find an empty room.

Going back to the wall over which he had climbed, he felt his way along it until he found a narrow door. He slid the bolts, making as little noise as possible, and found to his relief that it was not locked. Half a minute later Peter joined him.

"Windows all shuttered," whispered Tony. "Got to get up to the first floor. How are we going to do it?"

"Are you sure nobody has heard us?" answered Peter.

"Of course not," said Tony. "Better not make a row, though. What are we going to do? We've got to get up to those windows, haven't we? Couldn't reach, even if I stood on your head, so that's no good. Can't climb up the downstairs shutters because the laths go the wrong way and we shouldn't get a hold. I can't find anything to make a ladder of, so what are we going to do?"

Peter looked round the yard rather helplessly. This sort of adventure seemed to suit Tony, but Peter didn't like it. He wouldn't have minded so much if it hadn't been dark, but here you couldn't see a thing, and if anybody came out and pounced on them they wouldn't see him coming, probably, and even if they did, they were jolly well caught, because they'd probably miss the door in the

dark when they started to run, and fetch up against the wall.

Still, there was no backing out now ; only the sooner they got the thing over the better. He looked up at the shutters overhead.

“ Which are our rooms ? ” he whispered.

“ Don’t know,” said Tony. “ Have to get up there first, and if we guess wrong we’ll have to try again. Nothing else to do.”

“ How about getting on to the top of the wall ? ” Peter suggested. “ Where you were just now, you know. We’ll be a good bit higher then, anyhow.”

“ Got it,” cried Tony. “ Good man. We’ll get up there and then walk along the top of the ground-floor shutters and look in at all the windows. Jolly good scheme.”

Close to the wall, in one corner, stood a bench where presumably small repairs were done. With the aid of this, the boys climbed to the top of the wall and, sitting astride, began working themselves slowly forward with their hands. Tony led, as usual, and when he was close to the corner of the house,

he got to his feet, standing rather shakily and holding the corner with his hands. The top of the nearest shutter was now only half a yard from his feet, on practically the same level as the top of the wall : but the shutter stood only a couple of inches out from the wall, and Tony realised that it would give him precious little foothold. Still, there was the open shutter of a first-floor room to hold on to, and then the window-sill. Holding the corner of the house with his left hand, he slipped the fingers of his left into the narrow space between two laths of the nearest first-floor shutter and held tight. Then he put out his right foot till it rested on the top of the ground-floor shutter.

The open window was too near for him to risk speaking to Peter, but he jerked his head to the right, and Peter understood that he was meant to follow. Then, swinging his left foot also on to the shutter, Tony began his perilous passage.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BURGLARY

LETTING go of the corner of the house, and holding on to the shutter, now, with his left hand, Tony moved his right to grasp the edge of the open French window, while he shuffled his feet forwards. It was impossible, of course, to look downwards, and even if it had been possible he would have seen little in the darkness ; he had, therefore, to feel his way with his feet, without knowing when he would reach the end of the shutter below him—the end of his support. He knew, however, that he was safe till he reached the farther side of the window, and so he stopped to look into the room. Through a gap between the curtains he was able, as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, to make out the end of a brass bed. Putting up one knee on to the sill, he leant forward. His own room

had had a brass bed, and so for that matter had Peter's: probably all the rooms were furnished in the same way, so that didn't help. Still, if he could see the bundle where he had left it on the floor, close to the fireplace, he would know that all was right.

He could make out the white of the fireplace and mantelshelf, and there was certainly a dark patch on the ground near it. But then, would his bundle of clothes, wrapped as it was in a shirt, look in the darkness like a black patch or would it show up against the background? He wasn't certain. Peter would know: it was the sort of thing that Peter always did know, but it wasn't possible now to ask him. Tony wished that he had asked before they started. He hesitated about going back to find out. Or should he make his way into the room? That surely would be the best thing to do. He took a firmer grip of the edge of the window and lifted his knee, preparing to swing himself through on to the floor.

But at that moment he heard a sound—

a faint sound, but unmistakable. A sort of creak. What was it? Of course! It was the creak that is made by the springs of a bed when you turn over. Then there *was* some one in the room!

Whew! A narrow escape. In another second he would have blundered into the room, and then in all probability he'd have run into a chair or something and given the show away!

With every possible precaution against noise, he set his foot once more on the top of the shutter and began edging his way along it again, still farther to the right. He reached the farther side of the window, and felt the lower shutter end beneath his foot. Looking ahead along the wall of the house, he saw the second open shutter of the window he had just passed, then a space, and then the first open shutter of another window. Somehow or other he had to reach that other window: if necessary he would have to go the whole width of the house till he found his own room or Peter's.

Grasping the laths of the open shutter with his left hand, he took a firm grip and then leant to the right to the full length of the arm. The shutter swung forward with his weight, and for an awful second he thought that he was falling. His right foot went out and with it he groped frantically up and down the surface of the wall. It struck something, something that projected from the wall. Finding the top of it with his toe, he knew it to be the next ground-floor shutter, and with a sigh of relief he let his weight rest on it. Then he found the higher shutter of the next first-floor window with his right hand, and drew himself forward. He had reached the second window.

Standing there, he looked back to where Peter still sat astride the wall, and beckoned him to come. He did not know how Peter, less active than he, would manage that gap between the two windows ; but at any rate a thing isn't half so difficult when you've watched some one else do it, and Peter would probably have seen just how wide the gap was.

Once more Tony, at the open window, listened for sounds. He knew now what to listen for : for the creaking of a bed, for snores, or even for the sound of breathing. But there seemed to be no sound of any kind in the room. He could not see his bundle, but this room had its fireplace on the opposite side, so that it was out of sight for him ; and in any case this might be Peter's room, and he did not know where Peter had left his things. Come to think of it, Peter's room had been on the right of his as they stood in the corridor with Madame the previous day, and that meant that it would be on the left when you looked in at the windows. He'd have to come to Peter's room first, then, so looking for his bundle on the floor wasn't a bit of use.

Tony considered whether he should take the risk of climbing into this room, or go on till he found his own. But to go on meant passing more gaps between the shutters, and if they were anything like the last, as they probably would be, Tony didn't want them.

Too jolly tricky, hanging by one arm and feeling around with your feet, like that.

Of course, if he was wrong, and this was some other fellow's room, some Frenchman's, there'd be the dickens to pay, and the whole thing would be up. Still——

Tony threw his leg over the sill, and stepped quietly into the room. The nearest thing to him was the bed, and very gently he laid his hands on the coverlet. Only one way to find whether there was any one in a bed when you couldn't see, and that was to feel. Have to be jolly careful, though, not to press too hard! Just in case! But Tony couldn't feel anything: none of the ridges that you'd expect to come across where a fellow's legs would be.

Taking a step sideways, he extended the field of his search towards the pillow. Now that he was more used to the darkness, he could see the white of the turned-down sheet, diagonally across the top of the bed. But if the bed hadn't been slept in, that white line of the bedclothes wouldn't be diagonal, it

would go straight across. That meant that there was some one in the bed after all ! And yet Tony couldn't feel him. He had now felt over practically the whole of the coverlet, and he was certain that no one was under the bedclothes. What then ? Well, if there wasn't anybody in the bed, either it hadn't been " made " properly, or else some one had been sleeping there and had got out. In any case, this couldn't be his room or Peter's, because he'd seen the maid making their beds just before they started for the town that morning.

He was standing by the side of the bed, trying to think what had happened, when suddenly he heard a sound behind him. He spun round, and instinctively dropped to his knees with a sudden thought of crawling under the bed. Then he saw a figure framed in the open window. Peter ! Good man !

Going forward, he caught his brother by the arm. " Not one of our rooms," he whispered. " Bed been slept in. No one here now, though. Got a match ? "

Peter produced a box of matches and stood leaning against the window-sill. He was feeling rather bucked with himself for having accomplished that slide along the shutters. Of course, he knew well enough that Tony didn't think him up to much at that kind of thing, and he'd been pretty well on his mettle in consequence. It hadn't been so bad either. One tricky bit, but then he had longer arms and legs than Tony and he'd got over it all right.

He saw Tony strike a match and he looked round the room by its flickering light before it went out. Certainly there was no one to be seen in the room.

By the light of the match, Tony had seen the switch of the electric light over the head of the bed, and now he turned it. The room was an exact duplicate of his own—or, for that matter, of Peter's. The brass bedstead, the two wicker chairs, the funny-looking stool, the wardrobe, and washstand—all were there. The bed was turned back exactly as he had thought. Its clothes had been thrown

back, as if some one had jumped out in a hurry.

"No use stopping here, anyhow," said Tony. "Glad you got across all right. Pretty tricky, that gap, wasn't it? Well, come along. There are four more rooms along on the right and two of them are ours. No more shutters for me now! I'm going down the corridor. Coming?"

Without waiting for Peter's answer, Tony switched off the light and made his way to the door. The windows in the corridor outside were closely curtained and it was therefore in pitch darkness. Still, that didn't matter, thought Tony, for they now knew where to go. They had only to slip along to the right till they came to a door.

He had forgotten one difficulty, however. Pulling behind him the door of the room they had just left, he struck his foot against something that moved: and for a second he stopped aghast, his heart thumping violently. Then Peter nudged him and whispered, "Go on!"

"Something here," Tony whispered back
"Down there on the floor."

"Of course there is," said Peter. "I should have thought you'd have been prepared for that. Shoes, you know. You always find shoes at night outside doors in the corridor of an hotel."

"Lot you know about it," retorted Tony, and then, much as he disliked having been caught napping by Peter, he realised that it was no good making things more risky by talking. Stepping on to the carpet that ran down the centre of the corridor, therefore, he stepped forward into the darkness, his arms outstretched so that his fingers just touched a wall on either side. On his left he could feel a curtained window. On his right, he touched first a picture, then the lintel of a door, then the door itself.

Kneeling down, he tried to peep through the keyhole, but he could see nothing.

"Risk it?" he whispered.

Peter nodded. "I think it's my room," he answered. "I noticed that picture last

night, while you were in your bath. Jolly thing of a ship."

"All right," said Tony. "Don't you talk so much."

He turned the handle and pushed the door slowly open. The hinge creaked, but no sound came from within the room. Tony felt for a switch beside the door, found it and turned it.

"Told you so," said Peter. "There are my things."

"Well, that's all right," said Tony, throwing himself into a chair. "Jolly good thing. Better get your things together and tie them up and put on your mackintosh, and then we'll go on to my room. I'm next door."

"How are we going to get out again?" Peter demanded, as he tied the bundle.

"Better make a rope out of sheets and things, and slip down it," Tony suggested. "Too risky to try to get out of one of the doors. Ready?"

Peter nodded, and they went back to the corridor. They had no hesitation about

opening the door of the next room, for Tony knew that it was his. But as he turned to switch on the electric light, he stopped : for there, sitting in an arm-chair and reading a book, was Mr. Ratleigh !

CHAPTER IX

MR. RATLEIGH'S PLAN

"Oh, there you are," said Mr. Ratleigh. "Late hours for youngsters of your age. Dear me! It's nearly two o'clock: later than I thought. Well, what happened?"

Peter opened his mouth to explain, but Mr. Ratleigh interrupted.

"Better shut the door," he said, "and talk quietly. I don't want Madame to come and see what is the matter. Now then."

Peter looked inquiringly at Tony.

"Oh, go on," said Tony. "It's not our fault, anyway."

Standing in the middle of the room, while Tony sat on the edge of the bed, Peter told Mr. Ratleigh all that had happened. It made a long story, but Mr. Ratleigh listened patiently and in silence.

"I thought," he said at last, "that some-

thing of the sort must have happened. A pity, of course, that the possibility did not occur to me earlier, for then I would have gone to the town myself and have left you safely here. But no particular damage seems to have been done. It's a very serious position, though. Now, just tell me carefully about this poster. You are quite certain that it referred to you ? ”

“ Oh, rather,” cried Tony quickly. “ Got our names on it, you know, all the lot of them, just as they are in the books we left in our suit-cases. And there's two thousand francs reward.”

“ Yes,” said Mr. Ratleigh, “ I am not surprised at that. Assault is a serious matter in any country, and these Frenchmen take themselves and their officials particularly seriously. I imagine those posters will be distributed all over the country, or at any rate over this quarter of it. By to-morrow you won't be able to enter even the smallest village without being caught, and if you walk along a road the first person who comes along will stop

you. If you stay here, Madame will be able to build an annexe out of the reward."

"I don't see what we are going to do," said Peter.

"Well," answered Mr. Ratleigh, "that is exactly the position, and you've got to realise it. As I told you a minute ago, I suspected when you didn't return for dinner that something of the sort might have happened. I waited till after dark, and then I came to the conclusion that if anything was amiss, you would probably slip back during the night. I went to bed at first, but then I thought I had better wait for you in this room."

"Then," said Tony, "it must have been your room we got into."

"I should think it highly probable," said Mr. Ratleigh, "but that after all is unimportant. What is important is that you two boys should realise exactly how you stand. A most unfortunate position. You cannot possibly stay here, yet to go outside seems equally dangerous. I really do not know what ought to be done. I do not know what

your father would do if he were here. However, I have been thinking the matter over for the last four hours, and it seems to me that there are only two possibilities. You could, in the first place, give yourselves up. No," he added quickly, as both Peter and Tony started to interrupt, "no, I know that you don't want to do that. But it might in the long run be the best thing. It might be what your father would wish. You would have some very unpleasant days, of course, but I fancy that nothing very much would happen in the end. You are too young to be sent to prison, and I think that your father and I might be able to persuade the authorities that there was no need to send you to a reformatory. You would not, of course, be allowed to come to France again, at any rate for many years. But it is possible that nothing worse than that would happen.

"That, then, brings us to the second possibility—as far as I can see the only conceivable alternative. That is that you should go into hiding, with my assistance. A deliberate

conspiracy, of course, to defeat the ends of justice, and therefore a crime in itself. A crime, moreover, in which I should at the least share responsibility with you. I don't mind that," he added quickly, "provided that I am convinced that it is the right thing to do. But it is much too big a step to be taken without very careful thought."

Mr. Ratleigh paused and spent some minutes in lighting his pipe, while the boys watched him anxiously. There was no doubt which of the alternatives Tony would have voted for. Going into hiding would be jolly good fun, pretty much as he had planned it with Peter, and in all probability "Old Rats" wouldn't spoil the sport.

Peter, too, would have voted for that, although from a different reason. To him it was not fun, but merely the lesser—decidedly the lesser—of two evils. Anything was better than getting locked up in a cell.

"Well," said Mr. Ratleigh at last, "I suppose you will both vote for hiding? Right. Any boy would. Therefore, that

doesn't affect the question. It is a question which I alone must decide, to the best of my ability. As a matter of fact, I decided it before you came into the room. I do not feel that in any circumstances I could go to your father and say that I had allowed his sons to be sent to prison."

"Hurrah!" cried Tony.

"One moment," said Mr. Ratleigh. "I am not saying that you will not have to go to prison. It is quite likely that your father will decide that that is the only way out of the difficulty. It might, for instance, be impossible to get you out of the country. But I think the decision should be with your father, and that means that somehow or other I have got to get you to him. What happens after that, will be a matter for him to deal with.

"Very well, then. If I have to get you to your father, you have got to put yourselves entirely in my charge, and there must be no question of disobedience. I'm quite willing to admit, for the moment, that a boy may have some inherent right to disobey a school-

master in class, if the schoolmaster lets him ; but that doesn't apply here. This is much too serious a position for that, and if I am to help you and take you to your father, I must have absolute, implicit obedience from start to finish. Now, do you agree to that ? ”

Even Tony saw that that was fair.

“ Right you are, sir,” he said, and Peter agreed.

“ Very well,” said Mr. Ratleigh. “ Now one thing is clear. You have got to live for some days at the least without entering any town or village, and without being seen on any road : in fact, without being seen anywhere. That means that you must go into hiding, and rely upon me for supplies. You say you have already laid in a certain store of supplies, and they will be useful. I shall have to get you others from time to time. It is, therefore, important that I should remain above suspicion. I may be seen, but not with you, and no one must know that I have gone with you. It must be thought that I have gone on to Biarritz, exactly as I intended. You had

better leave now and return to that arch over the stream: I know the place you mean and can find it to-morrow. I shall account somehow to Madame for your absence and then go early to-morrow to the station. I shall leave the train at its first stop, however, and join you. Then—well, then I shall take you to a much better hiding-place that I know of, where I think you can stay for a day or two. Then we shall have to start making our way, day by day, towards Concarneau, avoiding the main roads, but getting a lift whenever it seems safe to do so.

“Now,” Mr. Ratleigh added, “it is past three and already getting light. People go to work early in these country places, so you had better get into hiding as quickly as possible. You will have to leave by the window. Munday Second, you had better get off that bed and start making your sheets into a rope.”

CHAPTER X

IN HIDING

PETER and Tony had no great difficulty in getting out of the hotel. In fact, as Tony remarked, getting out was a jolly sight easier than getting in. With Mr. Ratleigh's assistance they quickly made a rope of sheets, and then they climbed down to the yard and out by the door into the street.

Hurrying back through the fields, they lost their way several times before at last they found the little stream, along the bank of which they went until they reached the arch that covered their "dump." By that time they were ready enough for sleep, and they wrapped themselves in their mackintoshes, lying on clothes from their bundles under the shelter of the arch. They awoke twice in the night, to wish that they had thought of borrowing a couple of blankets from the

hotel ; but it was too late for that now, and they had to make the best of things. By the morning they were both ravenously hungry and very glad to light a fire and make themselves tea, with which they washed down a plentiful meal of tinned tongue and biscuits.

Mr. Ratleigh arrived at twelve o'clock. He came sauntering down the road, haversack on back, and when the boys ran out to greet him, he walked past exactly as if he had never seen them before.

Tony was aghast at this, but Peter assured him that it was all right. "He said he didn't want to be seen with us," he explained. "We will have to go back under that arch and then he will come creeping in when he's quite sure there's no one about."

Peter was right. A quarter of an hour later, Mr. Ratleigh suddenly jumped down beside them.

"Good," he said. "Quite a nice little crib. But you boys mustn't be foolish. It was madness to come out to meet me just now. Any one might have been watching,

and apart from the danger of your being recognised, it is extremely important that I shouldn't be seen with you. As long as nobody knows of my connection with you, I can bring you supplies, but when I can no longer do that, you will have to depend on your reserves."

Suddenly Mr. Ratleigh pointed to the remains of their fire.

"Another big risk," he said. "If any suspicious person had seen that smoke, inquiries would have been made. Please understand that you mustn't do these things. You may be prepared to run these foolish risks for yourselves, but I, at any rate, do not wish to go to jail for aiding and abetting your escape."

"Oh, right you are, sir," said Tony. "Awfully sorry. I say, sir," he added, "what happened when we didn't turn up to breakfast?"

"That," answered Mr. Ratleigh, "would no doubt have amused you, if you had been able to see it without being seen yourselves.

I, of course, stage-managed the affair to the best of my ability. I might have pretended that you had not returned since you left the hotel early in the morning; but then it would have been difficult to account for Munday Second's exceedingly crumpled sheets. I therefore left those sheets hanging out of the window, and returned to my own room and went to sleep. I was awakened about half-past six by a great commotion. The chauffeur of the hotel bus had seen the rope of sheets as he went to the garage. Madame, of course, is not used to the comparatively normal pranks of English school-boys, and consequently she was quite unable to understand what had happened. I did my best to explain that boys liked escapades in the night and that sheets were by far the best things to make a rope with, but I am afraid she did not see what I was driving at. Anyhow, about nine o'clock, I decided there was no point in staying any longer. I paid your bill at the hotel as well as my own, and drove to the station, after leaving an address at

Biarritz for the forwarding of my letters. By this time, no doubt, copies of the placard will have reached the hotel, and I think Madame will now understand the reason of your sudden departure."

"Jolly good bit of work, sir," said Tony. "But didn't she want to know how we got back to the hotel before we went out by the window?"

"I don't think," Mr. Ratleigh answered, "that that would worry her. She does not stand at the door and watch people come in and out, and I don't suppose she realised that you didn't return in a normal way last night."

"She won't know where we've gone, will she?" demanded Peter. "Hadn't we better be getting on? We aren't going to stay here, are we?"

"Which of those questions," said "Rats," "do you expect me to answer first? Anyhow, unless you did anything particularly foolish after we parted in Munday Second's room at three o'clock this morning, I don't think you

are likely to be trailed. As to moving on, no ! We stay here till this evening. Then we must move to somewhere a great deal safer. I know of a place where you ought to be able to hide with comparatively little danger of being discovered. It is about four miles from here : a valley, wooded and edged with giant rocks, where you will probably find a cave. You can stay there till the local inhabitants have forgotten about you and—what is much more important—till I have had sent back to me some of the money which I intended to pick up at La Rochelle. As soon as we have that, we ought to be able to move towards Concarneau, getting a lift where we can on the road and even possibly joining a train at some outlying station. But until I have the money we are bound to remain in this district, and that of course means hiding very carefully.”

Mr. Ratleigh had had less than three hours' sleep the previous night, and he insisted on borrowing Peter's air pillow and having a nap. Peter and Tony decided to follow suit.

They all slept till tea-time, and when they awoke the space under the arch seemed very cramping, so that the boys wanted to walk about outside. Mr. Ratleigh insisted, however, that the risk was too great, although, provided they all spoke in whispers, he was ready enough to try to entertain them, telling story after story, sometimes exciting, sometimes humorous.

"Really," he said, as they finished their tea, "if we are to be together for several days, I cannot possibly refer to you two boys as Munday First and Munday Second. For one thing it reminds me painfully of classes at school, which I am trying to forget. You have, I suppose, Christian names? Very well, then. Peter and Tony, I think? All right. And I doubt if it is even necessary for you to address me as 'sir.' As a matter of fact, you have, I believe, another name for me amongst yourselves. Isn't that so?"

Peter flushed and glanced at Tony.

Mr. Ratleigh laughed. "Come," he said, "I know all about it. You call me 'Old

Rats,' don't you? A delightful appellation. Very well then. I doubt the necessity of the word 'old' in ordinary speech, but if you address me as 'Rats,' while I address you as Peter and Tony, I think we shall all be saved a great deal of trouble. Do you see?"

"Yes, sir," said Tony.

"'Yes, Rats,' you mean," said Mr. Ratleigh. "I can assure you that I prefer it: that is to say, I prefer it on this holiday, although we shall have to return to disciplinary systems at school. Now," he added, "I think we had better start arranging that dump of supplies of yours, so that we can carry it. Peter can take the bottles of cider, while Tony and I share the rest between us."

It was at nine o'clock that night that they set out on their tramp. "Rats" had his haversack in addition to the food, and Peter and Tony carried their bundles as well as the rest of the supplies. They avoided the road, but "Rats" had a map on which, with the boys' assistance, he had marked their position. Then he had put a small cross at a point which

he declared was where they were making for, and drawn a straight line between the two. As they started, he produced a pocket compass with an illuminated dial and took their bearings. Even then it was always difficult and frequently impossible to keep to a straight line, as they went over ploughed fields, through a piece of forest, across streams, and through hedges. " Rats " possessed an electric torch which proved extremely useful, but nevertheless progress was slow, and after they had trudged along for an hour and a half " Rats " announced that they had still two miles to go.

He called a halt at the edge of a wood, and suggested that they should all sit down and take a rest.

" We are making," he said, " for a valley not far from the town of L'Aunay. I discovered it on my holiday the year before last : a little wooded valley, with precipitous sides formed by cliffs of rocks that are probably a hundred feet high. The valley ends abruptly in a similar cliff, down which tumbles

a great waterfall. It is a singularly beautiful spot, but quite unknown to any one but the local inhabitants. I know of only one English guide-book that even mentions it, and I don't suppose that more than a dozen Englishmen have ever visited it, although no doubt in ten years' time every tourist who comes to this part of Normandy will carve his name on the rocks. Anyhow, it will be excellent as a hiding-place. The rocks are smooth and quite unclimbable, so that there is only the one entrance to the valley: consequently, no one goes there except of set purpose, and villagers never visit the beauties of their own neighbourhood. Big pieces of stone have broken off the cliffs at various times and lie on the banks of the stream that is fed by the waterfall. Under these fallen stones, you could find innumerable miniature caves, although for our immediate purpose I think I know of a better place still, where we ought to be able to lie up for days without being discovered."

" Sounds jolly good," cried Tony.

“ The whole valley is excellent for our purpose, and it has the advantage of a constant fresh-water supply,” “ Rats ” continued, “ but the part of it to which I am going to take you is the best for us. Just at the entrance to the valley, a piece of one of the cliffs has broken away and stands by itself, five yards in front of the rest, like a great stone needle. In fact, the local inhabitants call it The Needle—L’Aiguille.

“ It would be difficult to climb to the top of the ‘ Needle,’ if not actually impossible, but it is quite easy to get half-way up, where there is a little natural platform, with a projecting piece of the ‘ Needle ’ hanging over it, so that if you sit on the platform, you are completely sheltered from rain. The platform is between the ‘ Needle ’ and the main cliff, so that you cannot be seen unless any one takes the trouble to walk right round the ‘ Needle,’ which is extremely improbable. An ideal place, in fact, for our purpose.”

“ Can we get to the platform in the dark ? ” asked Peter.

"Quite impossible," said "Rats." "Out of the question. We should all of us break our necks if we even attempted it. We shall have to wait in the valley till it gets light and then climb the 'Needle' before any one is about. Then you will wait there, while I go periodically to L'Aunay in search of food."

It was nearly two hours later when "Rats" again called a halt and stopped to examine his map with a good deal of care.

"We appear," he said at last, "to be a quarter of a mile out of our proper direction. Otherwise we should have reached the valley before this."

Turning sharply to the right, he led the boys across a couple of fields and then joined a narrow track that led steeply downhill. At the bottom of the slope they left the track, turned to the left, and soon reached a small stream which, "Rats" told them, came from the waterfall. They were walking along its bank, when suddenly Tony stopped.

"I say, what's that noise?" he demanded.

"Noise?" repeated "Rats," "what noise?"

"Straight in front," said Tony, and "Rats" and Peter listened for a noise from the direction in which Tony pointed. It was then unmistakable: a monotonous faint roar, like the sound of distant machinery.

"Can't be an aeroplane," said Tony. "Not here, at this time of night."

"That," said "Rats," "is the noise of the waterfall. It must have sounded like that day and night for some thousands of years. One day, no doubt, it will be put to use for making electricity, and a big city, with numerous factories, will stand where there are now fields. Not in my day, I hope. It's the most beautiful waterfall in northern France. Now then, follow my light and be careful where you step. There are any amount of brambles here, and we have got to break through them."

"Rats," with his electric torch showing a bright beam in front, led the way through a thick undergrowth of bracken as well as brambles, with here and there a clump of

gorse. The ground began to slope upwards. The boys' hands were fully occupied with all that they were carrying, and they found it almost impossible to protect their faces from the barbed strands.

"Rats" was leading, while Peter and Tony followed side by side. Suddenly Peter fell forward, flat on his face, his body sinking into a thick mass of bracken.

"Steady!" cried Tony, dropping his bundle and clutching at the back of Peter's mackintosh.

"A bit of rock," said Peter, clambering to his feet. "I couldn't see the beastly thing. It's right under all this stuff and I fell clean over it. I've barked my shin no end."

"Never mind," said "Rats." "You'll do better if you form single file and try to keep to my footsteps."

Now they could see the giant "Needle" towering above them. Its sides were steep, and Tony couldn't imagine how they were going to climb it. It seemed to be only about ten feet square at the bottom and even less

at the top : though where that top was, the boys could not see in the darkness.

Suddenly, out of the darkness ahead, something loomed : a terrific grey wall, entirely blocking their progress.

" Here," said " Rats," " we shall have to wait for the dawn. The cliff is in front of us, and the ' Needle ' is on our left. The valley leading to the waterfall starts here and runs for nearly a quarter of a mile. When daylight comes, you will get an idea of your surroundings, and then you will see what a perfect hiding-place we have reached."

The spot where they rested was thick with bracken, soft to sit upon. Indeed, in a very few minutes Peter decided that sitting was losing a good opportunity : he lay down at full length, and ten minutes later Tony heard him snoring.

" You'd better follow suit," said " Rats."

" Rather not," answered Tony, and then he hesitated. He had something to say, but it was a difficult matter to raise. He sat with his legs outstretched down the slope, and for

some minutes he sucked at a piece of grass in silence. Then suddenly he looked up.

"I say, you know," he said, "you're being jolly decent. Not a bit like a schoolmaster."

Mr. Ratleigh chuckled. "You boys imagine that a schoolmaster is some unapproachable kind of being," he said, "quite different from yourselves. So he is, to a certain extent, in term-time. He has to be. But here, no! In ten years' time you might be a schoolmaster yourself. Are you then going to change, and give up loving adventures? Not a bit of it. You'll have to keep yourself under control and appear to be fairly sedate all through term-time. But when you get away from it all, in the holidays, you'll be a boy again. I should say that you would always be a boy, on your holidays. I'm rather like that myself.

"All the same, this trouble that you've got into is really very serious, and I appreciate my responsibility. The thing that worries me is my doubt as to what your father is doing. If we could send a message to assure him of

your safety, I shouldn't feel very much worried. As a matter of fact, I wired to the Head this morning, saying that you are in my charge, and asking him to try to get in touch with your father. I am hopeful that he will succeed somehow or other, and in that case your father might even join us, and that, I must admit, would be a considerable relief to me. But meanwhile—well, I've got to see the thing through, and no one can deny that camping out, and hiding, and eventually trying to get across country to Concarneau is an adventure which, as I think you would say, Tony, 'has possibilities.' "

" Jolly decent of you to trouble about us," cried Tony, and then he asked, " I say, though, do you really mean us to call you—er—' Rats ' ? "

" I do," said Mr. Ratleigh. " For the moment, that is. You mustn't get into the habit of it, because next term I should have to give you fifty lines of Virgil for the first offence and a hundred and fifty for the second. But here—well, here I find it rather amusing,

and much more in keeping with our position as three hunted adventurers."

For some time after that, Tony and Mr. Ratleigh sat talking at the foot of the "Needle," and certainly Tony, in those hours, got a new idea of schoolmastering, and indeed of life in general, which was to stand him in very good stead in the next five years of his life. At last, however, he too grew sleepy, and "Rats" suggested that they should follow Peter's excellent example.

Tony was aroused two hours later by Mr. Ratleigh announcing that it was time to start their climb. They shook Peter into wakefulness, and then all three got to their feet.

The day was cloudy, but although the sun had barely risen there was a good deal of light. They could now see their surroundings. The great cliff wall was at their backs: smooth, grey stone, cracked here and there, with little clumps of grass and flowers growing wherever there was a ledge. In front, brambles and bracken stretched for a couple of hundred yards to where a second high cliff

rose to mark the opposite boundary of the valley. To their left, the bed of the valley was wooded, the narrow stream which they had followed the night before showing here and there as a silver streak among the trees. Huge boulders lay in the valley, and smaller stones protruded from among the bracken. On the right rose the "Needle." They could see now how immense it was : as high as the cliff behind them, a grim, grey monolith. It rose for a hundred feet over their heads, ending in a jagged peak. The ground between it and the cliff was covered with boulders, lying as they had fallen in years past, and partly overgrown with vegetation. But the ground beneath the boulders rose in a little hill, so that it was obvious that by clambering over the stones it would be possible to go a quarter of the height of the "Needle" before actually starting on the climb.

"Rats" pointed upwards. Fully half-way to the summit of the "Needle," a piece of stone projected towards the cliff ; below it was a

gap, then the platform of which Mr. Ratleigh had told them, and then a sheer drop, as it appeared, to the ground.

“A thousand years ago,” said “Rats,” “or five hundred years ago, or perhaps only two hundred years ago, the weather, and time, or perhaps a thunderstorm, must have caused one of the cracks in the ‘Needle’ to widen, until the huge block of stone that now lies amongst those at its foot loosened and fell. In falling, of course, it left in the smooth side of the ‘Needle’ the covered platform on which you are going to take shelter. Come. The sooner you are established there the better.”

He led the way to the first of the stones and showed them where to start climbing to the top of the fallen boulders.

CHAPTER XI

THE "NEEDLE"

THE way up the first of the boulders was easy enough. Mr. Ratleigh's haversack, the two bundles, and the remainder of the supplies had been left on the ground, Mr. Ratleigh saying that he could bring them to the platform later. Then Mr. Ratleigh went first, on all fours up the slippery stone, turning to one side or the other whenever he saw an easier foothold. From time to time he stopped to hold out a hand to Peter or Tony, and in a very few minutes the top of the highest boulder was reached.

Then the real climb began.

As the boys stood looking up the back of the "Needle," they could see that there were, at any rate, quite possible footholds and handholds—little ledges protruding a couple of inches or often more from the main surface, a

bunch or two of heather, diagonal cracks into which the toe of a shoe might be inserted.

"Tony had better go first," "Rats" announced. "I must come last, so as to be able to look up and direct you where to put your feet. Remember, although this rock looks pretty solid, you must not trust your weight anywhere until you have tested it. Where you want to hold a ledge, give it a good tug while you are standing securely, before you put your weight on it. The same applies to footholds. And above all, whatever you do, do not try to hold on by clumps of heather, because they are pretty certain to come out by the roots. Trust to the rock : but don't trust even that till you are sure of it."

Tony was about to start, when Mr. Ratleigh stopped him. "One other thing," he said. "Look up all the time. If you want to speak to me, speak, but don't try to look down at me. If you want a new place for your feet, feel for it with your toe, don't look for it. And as you go up, take note of all

the projections, so that when you've passed them with your hands you'll remember them for your feet. Now then."

Certainly that climb was a harrowing business. Tony, as he stood on the topmost boulder, while "Rats" was talking, had thought that it looked easy enough. But after he had clambered up the first three yards, his outstretched hand failed to find anything to grasp. The little projection on which he had counted proved to be rather like half an egg sticking out from the surface of the rock, and it was impossible to get any decent hold on it. Over to the right, however, there was a narrow crack, and he decided that if he could reach that he could slip along it, hand over hand, getting rather nastily near the corner, but nevertheless bringing himself distinctly nearer to the platform. He, therefore, began to feel the face of the rock with his right toe, remembering Mr. Ratleigh's injunction to feel and not to look, until at last he found a heather-covered ledge that would bear his weight.

Then he had carefully to lean to the right, and at last to stand for a second on his right foot only, while his searching fingers felt for and found the promising crack.

Then, as he had planned, he went hand over hand, upwards and to the right, finding purchase for his feet wherever he could, until he came to a more substantial ledge where he could rest and get his breath.

" Well done, Tony," cried " Rats " from below. " Very good. Now, move over to the left. Do you see that long break in the rock, running upwards, two feet from your left elbow? Right. Get your fingers on to it. Right. Hold tight. Now swing your left foot out. No, to the left, man, the left ! That's it. There's a corner there. Feel for it, and get your toe on to it. Good. Now swing on to that foot and reach up with your right hand."

In this way Tony made fairly good progress, though soon his breath came with difficulty, and the thought of the drop that there must be below him made his heart beat

at least twice as fast as usual. He wondered whether Peter had started yet : whether if he missed his footing and fell, he would strike Peter below him and they would both drop to the bottom. Ugh ! The thought gave him an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of the stomach and, as he shifted his grip, he noticed that his right hand trembled.

Steadfastly, he pulled himself together. Wouldn't do, getting nerves. Silly ! He waited a minute to get his breath and to calm himself.

"What's the matter, Tony ?" cried "Rats." "Are you all right ?"

"Getting my breath," Tony called back, and then, stepping upwards, he set his toe on a tiny ledge that had seemed to him, two minutes before, to give much too insecure a foothold. Yet it held him. "Good !" he muttered to himself. He had here a good hold for his hands, but he deliberately took them away, leaning with palms outstretched against the face of the "Needle," so that he was holding nothing and depending merely on

the one foot that rested on the tiny ledge which before he had not trusted.

He stood there for only a fraction of a second ; but he knew what he was risking, and he did it deliberately, knowing that it would give him back his nerve. It did. And after that he climbed steadily, without thinking of what was below him, until he was within a few feet of the top.

Now, however, Tony had reached the most difficult part of the whole climb. He was standing on a ledge that was secure enough. His left hand held a projection that was only three inches from the edge of the platform. But that edge was the next thing for him to grasp, and it was out of his reach. With his right arm straight above his head, he felt the face of the rock. His finger-tips were within a couple of inches of the edge.

Rising on to tiptoes, he tried again. Now his finger-tips were actually touching the edge : he could feel where the surface bent back to form the platform. But he could

not bend his fingers over it, he could not get the grip he needed.

Another inch and a half was all that he needed. But where was he to find it? He strained upwards. He felt that his ankles would crack as he straightened them in an effort to stand still higher on his toes. A bit more. The first bend of his middle finger was on the platform. But it wasn't enough. He knew that he could not hold by that while he felt for a new position with his feet. Must do a bit more, another inch! And then, without knowing quite what he had done, he found himself with all his fingers on the platform, holding the edge of it with a firm grip. He did not know where that extra inch had come from: but somehow, in his straining to reach upwards, it had come.

His other arm went up, and it, too, reached the top. Then he raised a leg, found a hold, shifted his weight, and a second later was lying at full length on the heather-covered platform.

Panting, he got to his feet.

He meant to shout down to "Rats" and Peter that he had succeeded, but as he stood, with his right arm touching the side of the "Needle" under the projecting roof, he looked ahead. He was above the tops of the trees that formed the little wood in the valley. Over their highest branches, he looked; and beyond them, glinting in the early sunlight, he saw the white foam of the waterfall.

"By Jove!" he said. "That's fine!"

Then, lying down on his face, he pulled himself to the edge of the platform and looked over. Golly! What a height it was! To think that he had climbed all that way! Peter hadn't started yet. Tony could see him talking to Mr. Ratleigh far down below. Odd they looked, too, when you could see the tops of their heads and not much else.

"Coo—ee!" he shouted, and Mr. Ratleigh looked up.

"Good!" he cried. "Now you can help Peter. Tell him where to put his hands, and I'll watch his feet."

Peter's few extra inches of height made the

climb easier for him than it had been for Tony. True, he wasn't so active, and he stopped more frequently for breath; but he could reach projections that had been just too far away for Tony, and the last bit was, he afterwards declared, not a bit more difficult than the rest. For "Rats," when at last his turn came, the whole thing, of course, was fairly easy, and he reached the platform in less than half the time that Tony had taken.

"I ought to have realised how difficult it would be for you," he said. "I did it myself, two years ago, and it seemed easy enough. It *is* for me, but not so simple for Tony. Well, anyway, here we are. Now, I've brought a good length of cord. I got it this morning on the way to the station, and it won't be a very difficult matter for me to go down again and tie one end to the various bundles and my suit-case, while you hold the other. Then we can all pull together and draw everything up. The haversack is particularly important. You've got your clothes, and of course there's that invaluable pillow of

Peter's which I mean occasionally to borrow. But I've something else, which should prove uncommonly useful. You'll see in a minute."

"What is it?" cried Tony.

"It's something that you haven't much use for, Tony," Mr. Ratleigh said, when at last they were finally settled on to the platform. "Not, at any rate, in the ordinary way," he added. "Not, for instance, on board ship." And, laughing, he opened the suit-case and took out the large travelling-rug which they had last seen over his deck-chair in mid-Channel.

"You'll think better of it now," Mr. Ratleigh chuckled, "if we have cold nights."

"Oh, rather," said Tony. "No end useful."

They arranged the biscuit-tins in a line along the edge of the platform, in case, as Mr. Ratleigh said, any one started rolling about in the night.

"Jolly decent place when you get to it!" said Peter. "I bet no one finds us here."

CHAPTER XII

SUSPECTED

LIFE on the platform of the "Needle" proved surprisingly comfortable. The space measured about seven feet by five feet, and almost the whole of it was overhung with rock. It was thickly carpeted with heather, and as a place for camping it proved in many respects ideal.

The first afternoon was spent in making everything shipshape. First, Mr. Ratleigh climbed down to the ground and collected a number of small bits of rock, which the boys hauled up by means of the rope, and with this was made a comparatively substantial parapet to complete that which had been begun with the boxes. Then one of the biscuit-tins was filled with fresh water from the stream, and after that "Rats" set out for L'Aunay in search of additional supplies.

He returned, heavily laden, about six o'clock. He had brought two loaves of bread and some butter, and a nice piece of cooked steak, which proved decidedly welcome after the recent diet of tinned food.

"What's that bit of chain for?" Peter demanded, when one of the parcels was unwrapped.

"That," answered "Rats," "is part of a sort of emergency ladder. You see this metal spike? I am going to fasten the chain to that and then drive the spike firmly into one of the small cracks in the floor of the platform. If it holds securely, as I think it will, we'll then tie a stout knotted rope which I have brought to the free end of the chain, and whenever any one of us needs to go up or down, the rope can be dropped overboard and it will make the climb a great deal easier."

"Jolly good idea," cried Peter, but Tony couldn't see why the chain was needed.

"Why not hitch the rope straight on to the spike?" he suggested.

“Because of the friction,” “Rats” explained. “At the point where the rope would turn over the edge of the platform, the friction would be very considerable and very soon the rope would be worn in two. But the chain is long enough to clear the end of the platform, and the friction won’t have any effect on it.”

The placing of the spike entailed a good deal of work, for it was difficult to find a spot where it could be fixed securely. At last, however, they found a narrow point in one of the cracks where, with a hammer that “Rats” had bought, it was possible to drive the spike well home so that its head, securing the last link of the chain, was practically level with the surface of the rock.

Then Mr. Ratleigh produced a stone jar to replace the biscuit-tin as water-carrier, and a small oil stove for cooking.

“L’Aunay,” he said, “is quite a good-sized town, with plenty of shops. I was careful to spread my purchases over several of them, so as not to excite undue suspicion. Camping,

you know, is quite unknown as an amusement in these parts, and already I have had to answer curious inquiries as to why I wanted such unusual supplies. I can see that I shall have to be careful. The last thing I want is to draw attention to myself."

That evening was passed cheerfully enough. Mr. Ratleigh thought that the money he was waiting for would arrive in two days' time. It was to be sent to him *poste restante* at L'Aunay, and he proposed that directly he got it they should start in the direction of Concarneau. Already he had bought a motorist's map, and now he suggested that the best plan would be for him to hire a car at L'Aunay. It would be necessary to take also a French chauffeur, partly because neither he nor either of the boys could drive and also because otherwise the owner of the car would doubtless demand a sum on deposit far in excess of anything that the money available could supply. Still, it was unlikely that the chauffeur would cause any trouble when the car was stopped, several miles outside the

town, to pick up the boys. If he did—well, there would be no help for it. If bribery failed, they would have to leave the car and continue on foot, trusting to luck to be able to get clear before the chauffeur summoned assistance.

The plan seemed an excellent one, particularly as Mr. Ratleigh had already ascertained that so far no notices concerning the boys had been posted in L'Aunay.

“When do you think they'll get them?” Peter asked.

“Not, I hope, until to-morrow,” was the answer. “France, you know, is divided into Departments, somewhat similar to our counties, and in our tramp to this place we crossed a border dividing the Department in which your ‘crime’ was committed from the next. I am counting on that to cause a few hours’ delay. Anyhow, I shall go into L'Aunay to-morrow and try to discover whether anything is known about you.”

At half-past nine, they all three voted for bed. Peter's mackintosh was spread on the

heather as a ground-sheet : then they all three lay as close as possible, covering themselves first with the rug and then with Mr. Ratleigh's overcoat and Tony's mackintosh. They would all have been considerably more comfortable if the space had not been so restricted, for when any one attempted to turn he awoke both the others. Still, the weather was fine, and Tony in particular got a good deal of enjoyment before he fell asleep, in lying on his back, gazing up at a star that twinkled under the edge of the overhanging rock, and listening to the distant monotonous roar of the waterfall.

The fresh air gave them all an appetite, and breakfast the next morning seemed very welcome. When it was finished, "Rats" announced that it was time he went again to L'Aunay. Telling the boys to remain on the platform, he let down the chain and knotted rope, and with its aid quickly clambered down to the ground.

Peter spent most of the next hour in cutting handfuls of heather that grew near the edges

of the platform and tying them into his spare shirt so as to form a pillow. That, for him, had been the chief drawback to the previous night—the lack of any better pillow than that provided by a bundle of clothes which he had had to share with Mr. Ratleigh. Before he had finished it, however, he heard Tony suddenly cry: “What’s that? I say, just listen.”

Stopping his work, Peter kept still.

From the ground below came the sound of footsteps: of some one running. The noise drew nearer and nearer.

“Better haul up that rope,” whispered Tony. “Don’t want the thing seen.”

Moving forward on their knees over the heather, they went to the edge of the platform and Tony grasped the chain. He started to pull it up, Peter holding it behind him, but it would not come.

“Must have got caught,” whispered Tony, and once again they stopped to listen. The footsteps could no longer be heard, and both to Peter and to Tony there came the thought

that whoever had approached the " Needle " must have found the end of the rope and be pulling it.

Signing to Peter to hold his legs, Tony leant forward so that he could peer over the edge. On the topmost boulder a man was standing, with his hand on the rope.

There seemed to be only one thing to do : to cut the rope and then to stay besieged, on the chance either of being able to climb down unperceived after dark or of " Rats " coming to their aid. Tony put back a hand to his trouser pocket for his knife and then scrambled to his knees.

" We'll try to jerk it out of his hold," he whispered. " If we can't, we'll have to cut it."

The jerk that they gave certainly tore the rope from the man's hand ; but the result was not what they had expected.

" Hi ! Let down the rope. Hurry up, Tony ! "

It was " Rats " ! But what was " Rats " doing here at this hour, when he had expected

to spend the whole morning in the town ? Did it mean that their secret was discovered, that the notices were already posted in L'Aunay, and that the search had begun ?

Excitedly, Peter let go of the chain, and a couple of minutes later Mr. Ratleigh's head appeared over the edge of the platform. He wasted no time in asking why they had pulled the rope from his hand, but came straight to the point.

" I've pretty bad news," he said. " Those posters must have been put up in L'Aunay last night : at any rate the whole town seems to know of you, and from what I could gather there's more direct news that you are in this district."

" Do you mean that somebody followed us here ? " asked Peter.

" I don't know," Mr. Ratleigh answered. " But what I do know is that there are about two hundred of the townspeople in the fields looking for you, and that some of them suspected me and chased me. I led them in the opposite direction, of course, and eventually

I outdistanced them. Then I crept round here under cover of a wood. I don't know yet whether I was seen as I came down the valley. If I was, they'll be well on our track in ten minutes' time. We've got to decide, therefore, whether to stay on the ' Needle ' or to look for a new hiding-place."

CHAPTER XIII

THE SIEGE

“ Look here,” cried Peter, “ suppose they weren’t looking for us at all? I mean, mightn’t it have been a rat-hunt, or something like that? ”

“ It is,” said Mr. Ratleigh grimly. “ It is *very* like a rat-hunt, with me for one of the rats and you two boys as the others. But there’s nothing to be gained by making a move until we know whether the men are coming here or not, so perhaps I had better explain exactly what happened.

“ As you know,” he continued, “ I meant to go to L’Aunay in search of news. In particular I wanted to discover whether those posters had arrived. Well, I never reached the town. On the outskirts, I noticed several groups of women talking in the streets. At first I thought it was market-day. Then I

saw numbers of men of the town going in a sort of extended order through the fields, peering into ditches, up trees, and into barns. It was quite obvious that they were searching for some one or something, so I thought I had better make inquiries before going any farther.

“ I went into an *estaminet* (that’s what they call a wine-shop), ordered a drink, and asked the girl what it was all about. She had a great deal to say and I couldn’t stay for all of it. But I very quickly learnt that two thousand francs reward was offered for two English boys, and that it was thought that they were in that neighbourhood. I stayed long enough to ask why they were supposed to be here, and she said that an Englishman had been buying large quantities of food and that as he wasn’t staying in any of the hotels it was thought that he must be in league with the *enfants Anglais*.

“ Well, that was enough for me. The girl in the *estaminet*, I am thankful to say, didn’t take me for an Englishman ; or rather, she

didn't immediately. Just as I was going she said, '*Monsieur est un Belge, n'est ce pas ?*' but I didn't stay to answer. I suppose she was getting suspicious. Anyhow, I didn't improve matters much. I didn't like to come straight back for fear of being followed, so I turned to the left and took a narrow lane that crossed the fields. Before I'd gone thirty yards, one of the field searchers looked over the hedge and saw me. I saw him, too. It was the man who sold me that length of chain yesterday afternoon. He recognised me at once and started to try and break through the hedge, yelling, '*L'Anglais ! L'Anglais !*' at the top of his voice.

"I took to my heels at once, and fortunately I had a good start. I kept on down that lane for a quarter of a mile, then turned into the fields and eventually worked my way here. But I had to come over an open meadow at the entrance of the valley. There was a small boy there. If he saw me, he will probably tell the men who are looking for me, and in that case the hunt will be in

this valley. The question, therefore, is whether we are to stay here, on the chance that no one will think of our having climbed the 'Needle,' or whether we are to take to our heels in the hope of getting clear of the district."

It was a difficult thing to decide. Even Tony found that the adventure threatened to become more exciting than he liked. Dodging a gendarme or two and hiding on the "Needle" was jolly good fun, but being chased by a hundred men with the certainty of getting locked up in prison if caught—well, that was a different thing altogether. He had once read about a fellow who was chased by a mob, caught, and then lynched: there wasn't much of him left, according to the story, when the job was finished. There wouldn't be any fun in that sort of thing—even in running the risk of it. If they took to their heels, that might happen to them—very likely would. If they stayed where they were, there was at any rate a chance that they wouldn't be found, and if they

were they could refuse to come off the "Needle" till they got a promise that they'd be decently treated. If necessary, they could even hold the platform like a fort until some official came up and sent the mob away.

Tony voted, therefore, for staying where they were. Peter rather hesitatingly agreed, because he thought the chances of getting off were about even, and to him it always seemed better to stay where he was rather than to do a lot of running.

"Rats" admitted that he didn't attach very much importance to what the boys thought. This was a crisis, and the responsibility was his. Still, on the whole, he agreed with several of Tony's arguments, although he refused to consider the idea of using their fence of stones as ammunition in case of an attack. He thought that if they kept absolutely quiet there was certainly a chance that it would not occur to any one to search the platform, and in that case they could hold out for a time at any rate. Of course the

men, if they came to the valley, would probably only go up it and, finding no one, would then go elsewhere. Then it would be possible to come down in the night and make tracks for another district.

When that was decided, "Rats" set the boys pulling the stones, stores, and bundles close against the back of the platform, so that they should be completely out of sight from any one who happened to look upwards from the ground below. Then they all lay flat on the heather and awaited events.

They had not long to wait. After keeping quiet in tense excitement for five minutes, they heard a sound from the valley below. Mr. Ratleigh had taken the heather which Tony had cut that morning and arranged it in a clump on the edge of the platform, so that it made a screen through which he could keep watch without danger of being seen. Squirming backwards, so as not to show himself over the top of it, he whispered to the boys that a crowd of men was entering the valley. He had seen them cross the

field, and already the leaders were entering the wood.

"Not a sound, mind," he whispered. "All depends on that."

Peter and Tony nodded in reply, but speech would have been difficult in any case. Peter's heart was thumping in his chest and Tony's mouth felt strangely dry. They lay on the heather, listening intently and wishing that they could take "Rats's" place at the look-out. The tramp of men could be heard from below. Now and then some one seemed to stumble over a boulder and there came the sound of a smothered cry. One or two men appeared to have established themselves as leaders, for orders were shouted. Then the sounds grew fainter, until at last the constant roar of the waterfall smothered them.

Mr. Ratleigh crawled back.

"I can't see anything more from there now," he whispered, "but one or two are still in the fields and the others have gone right up the valley. Searching under the rocks, I suppose. The question is, what will

they do when they draw a blank ? I wish I knew, but we can only wait. Remember, we must be quieter than ever when they return."

The lull lasted for half an hour. Then there were sounds of returning footsteps and " Rats " went to his look-out post. The men came slowly. Some of them had sticks with which they were beating the bracken in the hope of finding some one concealed beneath it. Others stopped every few minutes to peer under boulders, and once, apparently when something dark was seen, they all gathered round a huge stone and tried to pull it out of its place. Two of them even walked round the base of the " Needle."

At last, however, it seemed that they were satisfied that the boys were not in the valley. They went to the open field and there stopped. Mr. Ratleigh, with his eye to a minute gap in the heather, could see them gathered in one big group. For five minutes they talked excitedly. Then the group broke up and the majority of the men crossed the field in the direction of the town.

But some remained : a dozen men, armed with sticks, divided into couples and spread out in a long line to guard the entrance of the valley.

Mr. Ratleigh crept back.

The waiting men were too near for it to be safe even to whisper, but he took out a pocket-book, tore off a leaf, and began to write a message to Peter and Tony in pencil.

"Most have gone," he wrote, "but they've left sentries. They must feel pretty certain that we are hidden in the valley. Impossible to get out while they are there. We must wait here in case they go away at night. Lie down and keep absolutely quiet. You had better try to sleep, as we may be busy to-night. I will keep watch."

CHAPTER XIV

THE SORTIE

THE rest of that day passed drearily enough. It was all very well for "Rats" to suggest going to sleep, but that was out of the question. On the other hand, there wasn't anything else to do. Mr. Ratleigh promptly silenced even the softest whisper, and lying on one's back gazing up at a roof of blank rock wasn't a great deal of fun.

Yet, down below the sentries were still at their posts, and it was clear that to make any noise would give the whole show away. Tea-time might have meant a decent break in the monotony, but even that was a disappointment, for Mr. Ratleigh decided that boiling water on the spirit-stove would mean movement which might be seen by some chance watcher, and consequently the meal consisted of biscuits and butter, with cold water to drink.

Dinner was not much better, though it certainly provided some excitement. "Rats" opened a tin of tongue, but in taking his share Peter let his knife rattle against his cup of water, and for some seconds they all three lay in expectation of immediate discovery. Then, when dinner was finished, "Rats" put back the tins and the jar of water against the back wall of the platform, and a minute later Tony unthinkingly leant against the jar and overturned it.

It was all that Peter could do not to exclaim at the disaster, for it was a disaster indeed. The cider had been finished the day before, and the water in the stone jar was all that they had to drink. Impossible, of course, to go on living on the platform without water, so that now they would have to climb down and refill the jar from the stream. And that meant a much greater risk of being seen.

Still, there was no help for it. By writing once more on paper from his note-book, "Rats" conveyed to the boys a plan for climbing down after dark. He would go alone, so that if he was discovered he could

pretend that he was there by himself ; in that case the boys would probably have to shift for themselves, and they had better try to make their way out of the valley as soon as they got a chance.

They waited till midnight, and then, while Peter was tying the rope to the handle of the jar in order to lower it to the ground while " Rats " climbed down, Tony suddenly seized the paper and pencil.

" Much better if we come too," he wrote. " Can't do much by ourselves, but if we all stick together we may get through."

Mr. Ratleigh sat on the edge of the platform to consider the matter. There was, of course, a good deal in what Tony said. He had to admit that, once the boys were alone, their chance would be a pretty thin one. They would be without money, without any considerable knowledge of French, and certain to be arrested by the first man who saw them. They would be unable to get supplies, and it seemed that the only alternative to their capture would be starvation. Whereas if

they went with him—well, it was even possible that in the darkness they might all be able to slip through the line of sentries.

Taking the pencil from Tony's hand, therefore, he wrote : " Very well. I will go first and you must lower the jar. Then come down the rope, Peter coming last. Don't make any noise on any account, and follow my directions absolutely."

Climbing down by way of the rope proved vastly easier than climbing up without it : particularly since " Rats " was holding it tight at the bottom. In a very few minutes they all stood at the foot of the " Needle," and then they began to make their way towards the stream.

" Rats " was leading, then came Peter, while Tony brought up the rear. They went slowly, feeling the bracken in front of them to avoid stumbling over hidden rocks : but even then it was impossible to avoid a slight noise, the swish of the bracken as they pushed through it. Every few yards Mr. Ratleigh stopped to listen for sounds that

would show they were discovered, or, at least, suspected ; and then, encouraged, the three would once again advance.

In this way they came at last to the stream, where it bubbled in miniature rapids in the middle of the wood. With one foot on the bank and the other on a large stone in mid-stream, " Rats " bent to fill the jar, and then he hesitated.

A second later he clambered back to the bank. Putting his lips close to Tony's ear, he whispered : " The water isn't clean here. We shall have to go to the waterfall itself."

He set off, with the boys close behind him. The darkness in the wood was intense. Trees suddenly appeared out of a black background and all three ran into them time after time. They stumbled over boulders, tripped over fallen branches, and once Peter missed his footing on the bank and fell into the stream. Yet all the time they were getting nearer to the waterfall, and at last, while its roar became almost overwhelming, they saw it before them—a broad streak, white against the black-

ness of the night, coming from a great height into a little pool of still water at their feet.

Signing to the boys to remain beside the last tree of the wood, "Rats" went forward over slippery rocks, worn smooth by the constant fall of spray, till he was close to the bottom of the first great rock that rose behind and underneath the fall. Steadying himself with his left hand, he leant forward till the stone jar came into the fall itself.

Then he returned to where the boys were standing.

"That's the water, at any rate," he said. "Now, the question is, whether we are to return to the 'Needle,' or try to slip past those sentries. I'm inclined to think it is better to go back. Our hiding-place is still unsuspected, and when you have a good thing it is usually best to hold on to it. I doubt whether we should succeed in passing the sentries, and if we failed all would be lost. Whereas, if the sentries find they have wasted a night to-night they probably won't trouble to watch to-morrow night."

Taking infinite pains not to spill the water in the jar, they began the walk back through the wood. Soon "Rats" turned away from the bank of the stream towards the right, in the direction of the "Needle." All went well until he was within a dozen yards of the first of the fallen boulders: then suddenly he stopped, turned, and crept back down the slope, signing to Peter and Tony to do the same.

He led them then to the bank of the stream and across it: then forwards and up until they were close to the farther stone cliff that lined the valley. Signing to the boys to sit down and setting the jar on the ground where it was not likely to overturn, he crept like a scout first to one side and then to the other.

Neither Peter nor Tony knew exactly what had happened, but since Mr. Ratleigh had turned back suddenly from the "Needle" they guessed that their hiding-place had been discovered, or at least that some one was between them and it, so that they could not return.

It was not until "Rats" had made definitely sure that no one was within earshot as they sat on the ground that he explained the position, whispering cautiously.

"We're found," he said then. "At least, the platform is. A man was standing on the rocks at the foot of the 'Needle.' He had his hand on the rope that we left hanging. Careless of us, I suppose, to leave it like that, but it would have been almost impossible to climb back in the dark without it. Of course, it is absolutely impossible now for us to return. The man must be one of the sentries exploring on his own, and by daylight that 'Needle' will be surrounded. Then they'll have certain evidence of our presence, and it's very difficult to see how we can avoid capture for more than a few hours."

"Have to run for it, shan't we?" Tony suggested, and Mr. Ratleigh nodded.

"It's the only possible chance," he said, "and I am afraid a poor one at that. If we can't get through, I am afraid we are bound to surrender."

Creeping forward, close to the wall of cliff, they came at last to a spot where they could look down on the edge of the field that skirted the wood and the valley. The Frenchmen were dotted along it in couples, lying on the grass, but obviously awake.

At that moment a man came out of the wood and went to the first of his friends. He seemed excited, and at the sight of him the other sentries began to run towards him; but he waved to them to stay where they were, and then went from group to group as if telling them some important news.

Peter looked inquiringly at "Rats." "What's up?" he demanded.

"I imagine," "Rats" whispered, "that this is the man who found our rope. He must have climbed to the platform and found the very obvious signs of our camp. Now he has come back to tell his friends. That means that they all know that we are in the valley and they will keep an extremely keen watch to prevent our passing their line. It also means that when daylight comes they will

fetch all the other men and they'll then have a force strong enough to march through this valley shoulder to shoulder. They'll search every possible place of concealment, and there's hardly any chance at all of our escaping. I really don't know what we are to do."

"Isn't there any way of climbing the cliffs?" cried both Tony and Peter at the same moment.

"I certainly don't know of one," was the answer. "It is impossible, at any rate, even to look for one till daylight. Still, it is a faint possibility. I think that the only thing we can do is to wait at the foot of the waterfall till morning. That, of course, is the last place they will reach in their search, and directly it gets light we must all search the cliffs for a possible means of climbing them. If we do find one, well and good: we might yet be able to escape. If we don't, then I am afraid we can only let ourselves be captured, and hope that in the end we shall get off comparatively lightly. Come; we'll go back to the waterfall and wait for daylight."

CHAPTER XV

THE WATERFALL

THE night passed slowly. "Rats," Peter, and Tony sat on a rock within a dozen feet of the little pool at the foot of the waterfall, waiting for the first light of dawn. The valley there narrowed until it was only twenty yards across—the cliffs, as far as they could see in the darkness, rising sheer. In front of them was the waterfall itself, cascading down the cliff, which had been worn or broken into three tiers, so that what was in fact a single fall consisted of three smaller falls, one immediately below the other.

Staring into the darkness, Peter wondered how on earth they were to get out of the valley. If they didn't, then they would all have to go to prison, and although "Rats" might get off fairly lightly, he and Tony would be certain to get dropped on pretty heavily

for assaulting that wretched railway porter. They might get locked up for years. Peter had a great deal of faith in his father, but he couldn't see even Pater getting the better of the whole French Government. Besides, there were all these fellows from L'Aunay to be reckoned with first. Jolly difficult, anyhow, to avoid getting pretty well messed up while they were being captured. Awful lot of roughs, probably, and they'd each be so keen on getting the reward that they'd fight over them to see who could claim it.

Peter didn't like the idea of that, and it made him, if possible, all the keener to find a way out of the valley. He was feeling sleepy now, but somehow sleep didn't seem possible, even if the rock on which he was sitting hadn't been so jolly uncomfortable. Every time he shut his eyes he saw a picture of about a hundred men tearing through the wood, and then some seizing him by the legs while others took hold of his arms, and all pulled in different directions as hard as they could.

Mr. Ratleigh, with his face turned towards

the waterfall, had lit his pipe, keeping one hand on the bowl to make sure that the glow of it could not be seen up the valley. Obviously he was thinking hard, but without result, for every now and again he muttered to himself and gave a little sigh as if at the hopelessness of it all.

Tony couldn't sit still. Already he had wandered away and was feeling the surface of the cliff nearest him, and from time to time he would come back with the news that he had found a cranny that might give a foothold: though that, as "Rats" always told him, wasn't of much use until they could see whether there was any chance of further footholds and handholds higher up.

At three o'clock Peter declared that it was getting light, although it was hard to see any difference in the blackness around them. Mr. Ratleigh retorted that it would be useless to make a start until it was possible at any rate to see to the top of the cliffs, although, on the other hand, if they delayed too long, the Frenchmen might find them before they had

made a move. As the light gradually came, both Peter and Tony grew more and more impatient, and "Rats" looked frequently up the valley to see whether any one was approaching, until at last none of them could stand the waiting any longer.

"Tony," said "Rats," getting to his feet, "had better search the corner of that cliff, where it bends round towards the fall. Peter can examine the cliff on the opposite side. I shall go farther towards the mouth of the valley. Remember, though, that it is no use any of us summoning the others on a false scent: it would only waste everybody's time. A possibility of climbing the bottom half of the cliff alone is useless. So do not report anything at all unless you are quite certain that there is a possible, if not actually easy, climb for yourselves, right to the very top."

They separated. Peter turned to the right, and at first he went close to the cliff, feeling for low projections, and when he found them trying to look upwards for others. But soon he found that by this method he could not

see more than a dozen feet without stepping some distance back. He decided, therefore, that it would be better to keep farther back all the time : after all, the lowest projections didn't count for much—it was the upper ones that mattered. Even if there was nothing to hold on to at the bottom, they could climb on to each other's shoulders and reach a higher ledge in that way, while no doubt " Rats " would be able to reach a higher ledge straight away.

Standing back, he could see the whole of his piece of cliff at a glance. To the right, as far as he could see—as far indeed as the point where the thickness of the wood obstructed his view—the cliff looked absolutely smooth for a dozen yards. Immediately in front it was broken into little ledges and cracks, but he could not see how it was possible to make a chain of them up which they could climb. " Rats " might have done it, but for Tony and himself it was impossible.

In that case, unless either Tony or " Rats " found something, only the corner where the

cliff bent towards the waterfall remained to be looked at. It was dark there, for though the sun had now risen it lay behind the cliff wall—in fact, behind the waterfall itself. The light was already striking the tops of the cliffs farther down the valley, but here all was in shadow. That added to the difficulty, and Peter had to stand closer.

There wasn't, however, much to be seen. It was out of the question, Peter soon decided, to try to scramble up those smooth rock faces. What then was to be done? Had they after all to sit calmly—if they could sit calmly—and wait till they were found?

Peter stood and thought. Was there anywhere else? Any other place where there was even a possibility? How about the trees? They could climb one of them, but then, the men were certain to look there. That wasn't any good. But supposing they climbed a tree close to one of the cliffs, couldn't they use that as a start, slip along a branch and then get up the cliff from there?

He ran back to the edge of the wood. In many places the trees didn't grow close to the cliff at all, although here and there a single tree had branches that seemed actually to brush the face of the cliff. They didn't look very strong, these branches, and it would be poor fun to drop off one of them on to the rocks below instead of getting a footing on the cliff. And if that happened to the last of the three, the others would be landed on the cliff, with perhaps a chance of getting up, while the third, even if he weren't hurt, wouldn't be able to try again if the branch had broken, and so he would be caught. Better, even if it meant going to prison, to stick together rather than for one to get caught and the other two escape.

Suppose he had to go to prison by himself——

He was going forward along the edge of the cliff, looking up at the trees and calculating the chances, when he almost ran into "Rats."

Mr. Ratleigh looked gloomy, and Peter new at a glance that he had found nothing.

"No," said "Rats," before Peter asked the question. "No. There's nothing. Not a chance. You were looking at the trees. I've thought of that. I've examined every tree that grows near this cliff, right up to the end of the wood, and there isn't one near enough that could possibly bear the weight. Unless Tony has found something, and I don't think that likely, I am afraid we are done."

They went back together and met Tony at the edge of the pool. Tony shook his head dismally.

"Well, I'm sorry, you fellows," said "Rats." "Very sorry indeed. We've done our best, but luck has been against us. I'm afraid there's no help for it. Nothing to do but to wait till we're caught."

They stood, the three of them, by the side of the pool, looking through the wood in the direction from which their captors would come.

Suddenly Tony swung round.

"Look here," he cried. "Tell you what! Why shouldn't we climb the waterfall itself?"

CHAPTER XVI

OUT OF THE VALLEY AT LAST

MR. RATLEIGH did not even turn to look in the direction to which Tony pointed.

"Impossible," he said. "In fact absurd—absurd nonsense. No one could climb a waterfall. There are thousands of gallons pouring down there every minute, and the force of the water is terrific. If you even attempted it, you would be knocked over at once by the water and in all probability your brains would be knocked out on the stone below."

"Yes," persisted Tony, "but we needn't go right into the fall. We could clamber up the side of it. Look. There are three small cliffs there instead of one big one, and that would make it easier, anyhow. And if we kept just to the edge of the water we shouldn't get knocked over if we hung on tight, and

we'd get footholds where bits of stone have been worn away by the water."

Mr. Ratleigh turned. Impossible as the scheme sounded, he at any rate didn't want to lose a chance. Was there even the slightest possibility that what Tony suggested could be done? He looked at the waterfall. The stream of water was only about four feet wide, and in the course of ages it had cut or worn out for itself a sort of bed in the rock. Often, no doubt, after heavy rain or snow, there had been more water over the fall than there was at present, and consequently the bed was wider than the present actual fall. There seemed indeed to be about a foot on either side of the falling water before the cliff straightened out.

The question remained, then, whether it would be conceivably—or rather practically—possible to climb up in that one foot of space, when a side step into the falling water would mean being washed down, and when a slip of hand or foot would have the same result? And if it was possible, ought he to

let the boys risk it ? Was not the risk of an accident even more serious for them than the risk of being captured and sent to prison ?

“ I think,” he said at last, “ there is only one thing to be done. I must make the experiment. I will try to climb up beside the waterfall, and if I find that it can be done without undue danger, I will call to you boys to follow. But remember, you must not attempt it till I give the word. If it proves to be possible, it is at any rate a way out of this valley. We shall get soaked to the skin from the flying spray, and that would add to our difficulties at the top ; but at least we shall have escaped from an immediate and very pressing danger.”

Leaving the boys where they were standing, “ Rats ” waded into the pool. The water came up to his knees and the boys saw him duck suddenly as a shower of spray struck his face. Then, choosing the left side of the waterfall, he made his way forward till his hands touched the rock.

At first there was good foothold and in a

very few seconds he had climbed six feet above the surface of the pool. Then things became more difficult, and Peter could see him struggling for a grip of the slippery wet rock, while the water splashed his coat. At last he found what he wanted, climbed up another four feet and a second later he was standing on a level with the top of the lowest of the three bounds of the fall.

Peter and Tony waited expectantly, hoping that he would call to them to follow. "Rats" stood looking up at the next section of the climb, and the interval was so long that Peter found it difficult not to call out a question.

At last Mr. Ratleigh turned. Without speaking, he signed to the boys to come forward. They splashed at once into the pool, and then went more slowly, finding the bottom stony and uneven. Peter reached the cliff first. "Rats" was now kneeling and he signed to Peter where to put his feet and hands.

Peter found that to climb on the various little crags and ledges was not after all so

difficult : certainly no harder than the climb of the " Needle " had been. The difficulty, though, was to avoid a slip. All the stone was wet, and here and there a kind of moss grew over it. A foot set on the damp moss slipped at once, and even where there was no moss a foothold that could be relied on was extremely difficult to get. All the while, too, the cascade was falling with a roar that seemed to fill Peter's head. In a minute after starting he was drenched from head to foot.

Still, he went up and up, and suddenly he felt " Rat's " hand grasping his. One more struggle and he was at the top of the lowest fall.

Tony followed, and then, Mr. Ratleigh again leading, they set to work to tackle the second of the three cascades. This, if anything, was easier than the first, although certainly difficult enough. Once Tony slipped and would have fallen, but Mr. Ratleigh and Peter both clutched at his coat and held him for a second while he again found a foothold.

By this time, over the noise of the falling water, they could hear occasional shouts from below them, and they knew that already the valley was filling with men who searched for them. That, however, was a danger that now seemed at an end : for the three cascades did not fall in a straight line, the second bending slightly to the left and the last still more so, with the result that by the time they started on the third climb their bodies were completely hidden from the ground below.

It was when " Rats " was some feet up the last climb and the boys were thinking that in another minute his head would be on a level with the top of the cliff, that they suddenly heard a new sound. It didn't come from the ground below, or from the fast-filling wood. It seemed to come from directly above them, but a little to the right. As they all stopped to listen, they knew that it was the sound of some one walking on a road—a road that must run very close to the top of the fall.

Immediately Mr. Ratleigh began to come

down backwards to rejoin the boys. When he stood beside them he pointed upwards in silence. There was no doubt about it, the way out of danger at the top of the fall was already guarded.

CHAPTER XVII

IN DISGUISE

THERE seemed to be no way out of it. To go back, down the waterfall and into the wood again, was useless, for already the sounds of moving and shouting men appeared to come from the very foot of the cascade : and even if they waited till the searchers withdrew, they would run even greater danger of a serious fall in climbing down than there had been in the ascent. On the other hand, to go on seemed equally hopeless, for it appeared to mean the certainty of being immediately captured.

“ I vote we make a dash for it, anyhow,” Tony whispered. “ We can’t just stand here and let ourselves be caught. Must try to do something or other, you know.”

“ I know I don’t want to stand here,” said Peter. “ I’m pretty well wet through.”

"So am I," said Tony. "Wish I hadn't left my mackintosh on the 'Needle.'"

"That," said Mr. Ratleigh, "is the crux of the whole matter. Even if it were wisest to wait till darkness, we couldn't do it here, for undoubtedly we should all get pneumonia. No ; we must finish the climb, because that is, at any rate, easier than going back. And then—well, we shall be lucky, extremely lucky, if we escape whoever is watching for us."

"Must have a try, though," Tony insisted.

"Certainly," said Mr. Ratleigh. "I quite agree. Having had the marvellous good fortune to escape from the valley, we must certainly do our best not to fail now. I think the best plan will be for me to go forward alone and try to find a way for us all to get through undetected."

The final climb was soon accomplished, for the boulders were smaller at the top of the cascade, and it was easier to get a grip on surfaces that were not too slippery. Then, when they were all three at last on level

ground, Mr. Ratleigh signed to Peter and Tony to crouch behind a piece of rock, while he began to crawl forward on hands and knees.

The minutes passed slowly. Peter tried to wring some of the water out of his clothes, while Tony, sitting on a stone at the edge of the stream, began to wonder what they should do if "Old Rats" got captured. In that case, they'd better get up at once and make a dash for it. If there weren't too many of the men up here, "Rats" might have the sense to keep them pretty busy by trying to escape, so that he and Peter could get away without being spotted. Then——

But just at that moment a low whistle, three times repeated, came from the direction of the road.

"Bet that's a signal from 'Rats,'" cried Tony. "Let's go and have a look."

They went cautiously, taking cover where they could behind the rocks, because, as Tony whispered, you couldn't tell: it might be a trap. But they soon reached the road, and

stopped to look up and down it. To the left they could see for a hundred yards, and no one was in sight : but to the right the road bent out of view.

“ Ought to have a look along there,” Tony whispered ; and at that moment the whistle came again, now much nearer.

The boys turned the corner—and then they stopped in surprise. Just round the bend a man in a blue smock was lying on his back in the road ; and on his chest, holding his wrists against the ground, sat Mr. Ratleigh.

He looked up as they drew near.

“ Come along, come along,” he said. “ I can’t sit like this all day.”

“ Jolly smart piece of work,” cried Tony. “ Is he dead ? ”

“ Dead ? ” Mr. Ratleigh repeated. “ Good heavens, no ! He would be shouting at the top of his voice if I had not threatened him into silence.”

“ Did he put up much of a scrap ? ” Tony demanded.

"In that," said Mr. Ratleigh, "I was lucky. When I left you at the top of the fall, I crawled to the edge of the road and hid behind a bush. I saw this man come along, and when he was level with me he stopped, looked towards the fall, and then turned to go back the way he had come. He appeared to be patrolling the road like a sentry. So I sprang on him directly his back was turned and—well, I think he was too much surprised to struggle. A good thing, probably, because he is a stronger man than I am. Of course, I hesitate, at my age, to assault an inoffensive man in this way, but really in the circumstances—well, there seemed nothing else to do."

"Rather not," cried Tony, but Peter objected.

"It's all very well," he said, "knocking the man down and sitting on him and all that, but what I don't see is what we are going to do with him now. We can't take him with us, and as soon as you let him go, he'll rush off and tell the others where we

are. And if it comes to that, I don't see how we are to get away anyhow. We can't hang around much longer all beastly wet like this, and if we try to buy any clothes they'll jolly well nab us."

"I tell you what," said Tony. He turned to Mr. Ratleigh. "Why shouldn't you put on this fellow's smock? No one would know you weren't a Frenchman then, and you could go into a shop in the next village and buy us some clothes."

For a moment Mr. Ratleigh did not answer.

"I think that is quite a feasible suggestion," he said at last. "It is quite true that we cannot go on as we are: we should undoubtedly get pneumonia; and even apart from that, we should at once be recognised, for no doubt by to-morrow, if not earlier, every one within twenty miles will be on the look out for us. But if we could obtain some sort of disguise it might be possible for us to remain undetected. There is another village fairly near—not along this road, where we should doubtless be followed, but

on another road altogether which does not even go through L'Aunay. It is barely a mile from here, if we go across the fields."

In a very few minutes they had stripped the Frenchman of his smock and sent him running down the road, yelling at the top of his voice. Peter was for taking to the fields at once, but Mr. Ratleigh, with the smock hanging over his arm, insisted that they should first lay a false scent by going for a hundred yards down the road.

It was a good thing that they did so, for when Tony turned round he saw that the Frenchman had also turned, and was looking back to see which direction they took. But a minute later they went round a corner out of his sight, and then Mr. Ratleigh led the way on to the grass, stopping under some trees to hide his soaking overcoat and to slip on the smock in its place.

Peter found it impossible not to laugh then, for "Old Rats" looked exactly like a French farm-labourer, his rather shabby trousers helping the disguise.

“ If you are going to waste time in standing there and laughing, Peter,” Mr. Ratleigh said, “ there will be very little chance of our escaping. And, as a matter of fact, there is nothing to laugh at. You may think it very amusing to see me in this smock, but I can assure you that in a French boy’s clothes, which I hope to buy for you in a few minutes, you will look infinitely more ridiculous. It is not likely that anything very smart will be obtainable, and you will be lucky if you do not have to wear a sailor’s suit.”

It was Tony’s turn to laugh at that ; but he did not laugh half an hour later when, after the boys had hidden in a small valley, Mr. Ratleigh returned from the village with a pile of clothes over his arm.

“ The best I could get,” he announced. “ I don’t expect they will fit, but you will have to make the best of them.”

For Peter there was a pair of knickerbockers, a blue jersey, and a straw hat ; and Tony, declaring that they made Peter look like nothing on earth, laughed again until he

turned his attention to the narrow trousers (several inches too short) the tight-fitting alpaca jacket, and the small black cap which "Rats" had bought for him.

"Oh, I say!" he cried; "I jolly well can't wear these."

"In that case," Mr. Ratleigh insisted, "you had better go back to the other road and ask the first person you see the way to the nearest prison. I can assure you, Tony, that you will have an infinitely better chance like this than in your own clothes, even apart from the certainty of catching cold in wet garments. If you and Peter will keep your mouths shut, it is quite likely that no one will pay any special attention to us."

"Oh, all right," Tony grumbled. "Pretty good shock for the Mater, though, when we get out of the train at Concarneau."

"I think," Mr. Ratleigh answered, "that she would put up with that in her joy at getting you back. But, when you talk of getting to Concarneau, you seem to have forgotten that I did not receive my supply

of money at L'Aunay. And nearly all I had was spent on these clothes : in fact, I have only about seventy francs left."

Tony whistled.

"Do you mean to say," said Peter, "that we've got to *walk*? I thought it was over a hundred miles."

"By road," Mr. Ratleigh answered, "or for that matter by rail, it is about a hundred miles. But as the crow flies it is barely sixty. You see, between us and Concarneau there is a big inland sea—not exactly a bay, because although it is twenty-two miles across and about eighteen miles through, the two headlands at its mouth are barely half a mile apart. The road goes a good distance inland to avoid it : so does the railway. But I am proposing to go straight to a little town on this side of the water. From there we can get aboard a small steamer which will take us straight across the inland sea and about twelve miles up a river on the farther side. Of course, the fare on the steamer is very little, and by the time we leave the boat we

shall be within forty miles of Concarneau. Incidentally, we shall have got into another *Département*, and I am hoping that once we are there no one will bother to look for us."

CHAPTER XVIII

ALONE AGAIN

THEY spent that night in a lonely shed, lying on bundles of straw. For dinner they had bread and some slices of veal which Mr. Ratleigh bought at a neighbouring village—a cold and unappetising meal—but then, Mr. Ratleigh refused to take the risk of letting the boys enter the inn.

“ I can’t trust you to keep your mouths shut,” he insisted. “ Tony would be certain to exclaim at the behaviour of his neighbours or to make some foolish joke about the waiter. Then we should be recognised at once.”

“ Know I jolly well shouldn’t,” Tony protested; but no amount of argument could alter “ Rats’s ” decision.

“ No,” he said. “ Perhaps I will take you

to a small inn for coffee in the morning, as I expect by that time we shall all be in need of something hot. But in the meantime, you must make the best of this."

As a matter of fact, when morning came, Mr. Ratleigh himself seemed to feel the cold more than anybody, and he declared that the water of the fall must have got into his shoes. "Extremely inconvenient," he declared. "If I am laid up—well, I suppose I could go to an hotel; but I haven't the slightest confidence that you two boys would keep out of mischief. On the contrary, in fact."

"But," said Peter, "you'll be all right. You've only got a bit of a cold."

"I hope so," said Mr. Ratleigh. "Most emphatically, I hope so. But I must confess that I feel decidedly shivery."

He led the way into a roadside inn, and there they all drank hot coffee and ate rolls and butter, but Mr. Ratleigh had obvious difficulty in preventing his teeth from chattering, and even Peter could not help

seeing that he looked exactly as if he had got a touch of 'flu.

"I say," Peter said at last, "what are we going to do if you really are laid up? I suppose we'll have to go to somewhere a bit bigger than this, where there's a doctor : only it will be pretty risky."

Mr. Ratleigh turned and looked up at the closed window as if he was quite certain that it was letting in a draught.

"I must struggle on as far as Boisselle—the town I told you of, on the shore of the inland sea," he said. "There I must go to bed, for a day at least. I really cannot go on like this any longer. I must take off this smock, because it would be far safer to appear as an ordinary English tourist. But as to you—well, I am not certain. You certainly must not come with me, for the three of us together would invite immediate suspicion. On the other hand, I feel certain that you would give the game away if you were alone in the town."

"Still," Tony objected, "we'll have to

have something to eat, you know. You can't just leave us stuck in a field."

"My dear boy," said Mr. Ratleigh crossly, "of course, I know that. That is the whole of the difficulty. I shall be compelled to give you some of the remaining money, and then as soon as you enter a shop to spend it, you will be in danger. On the whole, I think you had better stay here, where, at any rate, you will meet fewer people than you would do in Boiselle."

"Do you mean in this inn?" Peter asked.

"Of course not," was the answer. "That would be impossible. You had better sleep in the shed where we slept last night. I will buy as much food as I can without arousing suspicion—enough, at any rate, to last you until to-morrow afternoon. If you want more, and I have not returned, Tony must stay here while Peter goes into Boiselle to get whatever is necessary. I imagine, Peter, that you will manage to make yourself understood, and to talk English in Boiselle will not

attract nearly so much attention as it would do here, for quite a number of tourists go there. And, incidentally, Peter by himself is not likely to arouse suspicion amongst people who are looking for you both together."

It was arranged that for the time being they should all go on towards Boisselle, which was only four miles away, in the hope that Mr. Ratleigh would be well enough to continue the journey; but after they had walked two miles, "Rats" declared that he felt appreciably worse, that his back and legs ached so that he could hardly walk, and that he felt they must abandon all hope of trying to go on by boat that day.

"A good night's rest in bed may work wonders," he said, although both Tony and Peter thought that he looked as if he was going to be laid up for at least a week. He took off his smock and buried it in the ditch. Then he gave Peter twenty-five francs, repeating his instructions that they must use every precaution to avoid being seen, and if

Peter had to go into Boisselle he must make his purchases at the first shop he came to, and get back to the shed as quickly as possible. Then, with a wave of the hand, he walked down the road, looking extremely shaky.

"I say, he does look bad," cried Peter.

"Rather," answered Tony. "Looks like being jolly ill. Bet we have to hang about here for another week. Pretty good fun, you know, camping out in that shed."

"It'd be ever so much better if we went to the hotel," said Peter. "I don't see why we can't."

"Not much fun if we couldn't talk," said Tony.

"Oh, that would be all right," answered Peter. "We could pretend we were foreigners—Spaniards, you know, or something of that sort. Nobody'd know we were English in this rig."

"Not a bad scheme," cried Tony. "Might try it to-morrow, if it rains or anything. How

long can you stay in an hotel on twenty-five francs ? ”

Peter didn't know, but he felt that it wouldn't be for many days ; and accordingly he reluctantly agreed to stay in the shed as long as possible.

CHAPTER XIX

FLIGHT

THE next day passed quietly enough—indeed far too quietly for Tony, who found that sitting in a shed at the side of a field, became very poor fun indeed after the first two hours. There simply wasn't anything to do, and after tea he insisted on going for a walk. After all, where was the harm? If they kept away from the road they weren't likely to be seen, and if they were—well, at any rate, then there would be the fun of having to dodge and get back to the shed without that hiding-place being suspected. But, as it happened, even that excitement was denied him, for during a two hours' walk through the fields they met no one.

Tony got up the next morning quite determined that he wasn't going to spend another day just hanging about.

" I'm jolly sick of this," he said. " There isn't a thing to do—wouldn't be so bad if we were in a wood, but out here in these fields. . . . Look here, how about going into Boisselle ? "

" What for ? " asked Peter.

" Oh, just to see the place, you know ; we could muck round the town a bit and go to some shops. Jolly sight better than squatting in this rotten shed, anyhow."

" It'd be a bit risky," Peter expostulated.
" ' Rats ' said——"

" Oh, I know ! " Tony broke in. " But he can't expect us to do nothing for days. And, anyhow, you've got to go in this evening to buy some food, and you can bet your life I'm not going to stay here alone while you're gone. Never meant to, if you come to that. Of course I'm coming too, and we'll see if we can't have some fun. It's safe enough, of course. I don't suppose anybody is looking for us out here, and anyhow they won't spot us in these clothes."

Peter frankly didn't like the idea of it,

but as usual he gave in, and agreed to Tony's suggestion. The only question, then, was whether they should go after lunch or wait till the evening, and Tony insisted that there wasn't the slightest point in putting it off.

They set out to walk the four miles to Boiselle, going by the fields, but keeping parallel to the road. It wasn't bad fun, like that, because it meant clambering through a good many hedges and jumping a couple of brooks. But it was heavy walking, and neither Peter nor Tony was sorry when the roofs of Boiselle appeared in sight.

"Where shall we go?" Peter asked. "I suppose we'd better find the first decent shop and get our grub."

"No fear," said Tony. "Don't want to carry it about with us all day. We'll get that last of all. I vote we go down to the water and see if there are any boats."

It was the biggest town, except for Dieppe,

and of course Paris, that they had seen in France. The main street was wide, and contained some quite decent shops. Farther along were two hotels opposite to each other, and the boys wondered whether Mr. Ratleigh was in one of them and whether he was better. But of course it was out of the question to go and ask for him—it would give the show away for one thing, and for another it would mean the certainty of a row, because “Rats” would say that they ought to have stuck to the fields, or at any rate that Tony ought not to have come as well as Peter.

There were one or two English people in the streets, and when Peter saw a boy with the Repton cap, he caught hold of Tony’s arm and turned down a side street.

“We jolly well can’t let that chap see us in these things,” he said.

“Don’t see why not,” Tony answered. “He’d only take us for a couple of French fellows. I say, I wonder which is the way down to the boats?”

Peter said that if you wanted to get to

water you had only to keep on going downhill and you were certain to come to it ; and after they had followed that plan for a quarter of an hour, they turned a corner and suddenly came on a huge, open stretch of water, exactly like the sea, except that a dim and misty line of coast could be seen in the far distance.

“ Suppose that’s where we’ve got to get to,” said Tony. “ Straight over there, and then up a river for twelve miles. Let’s see if we can find the steamer.”

For half an hour they walked along streets close to the water’s edge, and then they reached the quay—a sort of small harbour formed by a curving stone breakwater. There lay several small sailing-boats, one or two fishing-smacks, and a number of skiffs. But there was no sign of a steamer.

“ Don’t expect she’s come in yet,” said Tony. “ Wish we could find out when she’s due, though. It might be jolly useful when ‘ Rats ’ gets better, if we knew what time she sailed.”

He looked round in the hope of finding a notice. But nothing was to be seen.

“Look over there!” cried Peter suddenly, and he pointed to a signpost. “That shows the way to the *Mairie*—that’s the Town Hall, you know. There’s pretty sure to be some sort of a sailing list stuck up there.”

They followed the direction indicated by the signpost, and soon reached a building of red brick, with a gendarme on duty at the door. Even Tony felt a sudden fear at the sight of the gendarme, but the man paid no attention to them, and it seemed certain that their disguise was sufficient to avoid his suspicion. But it was a different matter when they stopped for a second to look at the notice-board and saw on it the same poster which had filled them with alarm a few days previously in L’Aunay.

“By Jove,” cried Tony, “they’re after us still! Let’s get out of this.”

They turned away, hardly noticing a tall Englishman who had stood beside them near

the notice-board. And it was not until they had hurried down several streets that Peter suddenly clutched Tony's arm and cried, "I say, Tony, I believe we're being followed!"

"Followed!" echoed Tony. "What do you mean?"

"There's a man over there," Peter explained. "I'll swear I saw him two streets back, and he's still almost level with us. We've been twisting and turning all over the place, and I don't believe this chap would be still here if he hadn't been following us."

Tony turned. On the opposite pavement a man stood watching them, and as Tony broke into a run, he began to hurry after them.

"Have to give him the slip," Tony panted. "Don't see . . . though . . . why he should suspect us."

There were footsteps now behind them, which showed that the man was running too, and the boys ran for all they were worth, turning down side streets and back on their

tracks whenever they got a chance. But try as they would, the man was easily able to keep close behind them.

"I don't see how we're to throw him off," said Peter. "We can't keep on running much longer. At least, I know I can't."

"All right," said Tony. "Let's stop and walk back. If he wants to talk, let him: only don't let him collar you. If he tries any tricks of that sort, you run off to the right, and I'll go the other way. That'll puzzle him a bit, because he won't know which of us to follow—give us a bit of a start, you know, and we'll have got our wind back by that time, anyhow. Make your way downhill and work round to the quay. I'll go there too. Ought to be able to dodge him like that, you know."

To Peter it didn't seem much of a scheme, but anything was better than just running on when you hadn't any wind to run with.

They stopped suddenly, turned, and started back in the direction from which they had

come. The man on the opposite pavement stopped too, and then he started to cross the road as if to head them off.

“Just a minute,” he cried. “I want a word with you.”

CHAPTER XX

THE INLAND SEA

ON the spur of the moment Tony remembered to shake his head and say, "*Je ne comprends pas*" in as good a French accent as he could manage.

"Oh, nonsense!" was the answer. "I heard you talking English a moment ago, outside the Mairie. That's what aroused my suspicions. And you run like English public-school boys. No French kids ever run like that. Suppose you just explain what you are up to—dressed up like French boys when you are quite obviously English."

"I don't see what it's got to do with you," Tony answered. "Supposing we are English—well, I don't see why we can't wear what clothes we like."

"Oh, well," said the man, "as far as that goes . . . Still, I don't believe you're dressed

up like that for the fun of the thing. And I've read those posters, too. I think you'd better tell me all about it."

Tony looked at Peter, trying to sign to him not to say too much. Of course this fellow would be after the reward; or even if he didn't care about that, he'd hand them over to the authorities nevertheless, because he'd think it the right thing to do.

"Don't see why we should," he said, and he edged off to the right, ready to run down the street.

"That's nonsense," was the answer. "If you won't explain matters I shall have to take you into the Mairie and see if you'll talk there."

He reached out a hand, but Tony slipped aside.

"Run, Peter," he cried; but as Peter turned, the man leant forward and gripped him by the shoulder.

"Not so fast," he said. "I'll have one of you at any rate."

That was not what Tony had counted on.

Useless, of course, for him to run while this fellow had got hold of Peter, and yet, if they started a scrap it was bound to make a noise, and then half a dozen people would come out of houses, and the game would be up. But Peter was struggling, and it was clear that the Englishman hadn't got a proper hold. Tony, therefore, lunged forward, suddenly barging the man in the back and sending him flying sideways.

"Off you go, Peter!" cried Tony, and then, having seen that Peter was free and running as hard as he could, Tony turned and ran down the street in the opposite direction.

There wasn't much chance of the Englishman getting on to his feet again for half a minute, and then he'd probably hesitate as to which of them to follow. And by that time they'd both be out of sight. If Peter had the sense to remember which way to go, it ought to be all right.

Tony turned sharply to the left, down a narrow alley, and when he saw that this was bringing him into the main street he broke

into a walk. Not a bit of good making everybody suspicious by tearing through a crowd as if he was being chased. Besides, it wouldn't be necessary. He could slip along quickly enough without that and be well out of sight before the man came down that alley, even if he did come down it at all—much more likely that he'd go straight along the other road and lose the scent altogether.

Turning to the right in the main street, therefore, he went in the direction of the quay. The question was, assuming that Peter turned up all right, what were they to do next? They'd have to get out of Boisselle pretty quickly. If they didn't, they might meet that man at any moment, and it wasn't likely that they'd be able to escape again. But to get back to the shed they'd have to go right through the town; pretty risky!

When at last he reached the quay there was no sign of Peter, and he began to wonder what he should do. Of course he'd have to wait for the fellow to turn up—only in that

case he'd better get under cover ; wouldn't do just to hang about in the open, in case that man turned up again. Come to that, it would be a good plan to fill up the time by going into a shop and buying some food.

Tony felt in his pockets. He still had ten francs, and he went into the first useful shop he found, noticing some attractive tins of fruit in the window, and deciding that if they had those they would probably have something more substantial as well.

A girl behind the counter said, " M'sieu ? " and he wondered what he should ask for. Sandwiches would be all right, only what the dickens was the French for " sandwich " ? *Du pain*—that was bread, all right—and *de la viande*—or was it *du viande* ? Tony wished more than ever that Peter would turn up as he struggled to make the girl understand what he wanted. He tried to show her, moving his hands as if he were cutting the bread, buttering it, and then putting the meat inside, but she only gaped at him, and at last called to her side a man in an apron.

The man looked at Tony, and then said, "Un Anglais"; and Tony, feeling suddenly nervous, wished that he could remember the French for "I am a Spaniard" or something of that sort, so as to put these people a bit off the scent, as Peter had suggested. Not a bit of good going on like this, anyhow, and suddenly he turned and went to the door to look for Peter.

Oh, thank goodness, there he was! Tony didn't bother any more about the sandwiches, but ran out of the shop, leaving the man and the girl looking after him in surprise.

"Thought you were never coming," he cried. "I went in there to get some——"

"I met that man again," Peter interrupted. "I'm not sure if he saw me, but he was coming this way, anyhow, so I had to dodge."

"Did he follow you?" Tony demanded.

"I don't know," was the answer. "I don't think so. He was coming down the main street, just as if he was coming here."

"Look here," said Tony. "I've been thinking things out. Not a bit of good

hanging about here any longer. The man may turn up at any moment, and then we're done. And we can't go through the town again. I vote we pinch one of those skiffs and row down the lake. Then we can get ashore higher up and walk back to the shed. Come on."

Fortunately there was no one about at that moment, and it was easy to choose a light boat, untie the painter, and push off from the quay. Peter was full of questions about what they should do about returning the boat, but Tony told him to shut up. Somebody would be certain to find the thing, he said, because they weren't going to take it far. They took a scull each and, pulling hard, soon got out of the little harbour.

"But we haven't got any food," Peter objected.

"I know," said Tony. "But it doesn't matter. I mean, we couldn't get any now in any case—much too risky. We'll have to have another shot later. I tell you what," he added. "Let's keep this boat for a bit—

hide it somewhere, you know, and then go back after dark. That won't be half so risky as going in by road. There's an island over there. We could tie up on the other side of it, where no one will see us, and then row back about eight o'clock. There's certain to be an inn or somewhere where we can buy some grub."

Peter agreed, not so much because he thought it would be any less risky, as because he didn't want to have to tramp four miles back to the shed.

"I vote we spend the night there too," he suggested.

"Don't see why we shouldn't," Tony agreed. "Rather fun. Only we'll have to go back to the shed eventually, or 'Rats' won't know where to find us."

CHAPTER XXI

AT SEA !

THE island was very small, but it rose steeply out of the water, so that a small boat on its farther side was completely hidden from the shore. A clump of bushes grew near the water's edge, and it was easy to tie up to this with the painter. After dark, the boys rowed as quietly as they could back to a spot near the quay, climbed ashore, and looked for a place where they could buy food. Tony was determined not to go back to the little shop where he had been before, and Peter had no desire to go into the main street, where at any moment the Englishman might find them ; but fortunately they found a shop on the very outskirts of the town, where they were able to buy some tinned meat, biscuits, bread, and a bottle of soda-water from a very deaf old woman. These

they carried back to the boat without meeting any one except a couple of fishermen, and in a very few minutes they were back on the island.

Tony decided to sleep in the bottom of the boat, although Peter, after trying the experiment, insisted that the grass on the island was certain to be a jolly sight softer. The night passed without incident, although neither of them was able to get a great deal of sleep.

In the morning, Peter was the first on his feet, very stiff with cold and cramp.

"Wake up, Tony," he cried. "I say, I *am* stiff."

Tony rolled over. "You'd be a jolly sight stiffer if you'd slept on these boards," he cried. "What have we got for breakfast?"

Peter looked down at the little heap of tins at his feet.

"Only tinned meat and biscuits and soda-water," he said. "We ate all the bread last night. I say, I wish we had some

tea. I could jolly well do with a good hot drink."

"Same here," said Tony. "I vote we get some. It's only eight o'clock. Won't be anybody about, you know. I vote we row back and see what we can get."

"If we meet that man again . . ." Peter began.

"Shan't," said Tony. "Nobody gets out at eight o'clock on a holiday except for a bathe, and you don't bathe in a harbour. We'll be all right. Come along. Worth a bit of risk, anyhow, to get a hot drink. I'm jolly cold."

They untied the painter and started to row towards the quay. As they drew nearer, they saw that there was a surprisingly large number of people about, and they noticed a little knot of fishermen staring in their direction.

Peter rested on his oars.

"Those fellows are watching us," he said. "I say, supposing they've missed the boat!"

"By Jove!" said Tony, "I hadn't thought of that. I suppose they'll think we've stolen it. Looks to me as if we'd better clear out."

"I don't see where we're to go to," said Peter. "We can't row all the way across the sea—didn't 'Rats' say it was sixteen miles, or something? And if we go higher up, they may walk along the shore and cut us off."

"All the same," Tony insisted, "I know I'm not going on while all these fellows are looking at us. Look, two of them are getting into a boat. And now some one else is coming down. Looks English to me. I say, it's that man again, isn't it?"

"I don't think so," said Peter. "I can't see from here, only I think he was taller than that. I say, pull her head round, Tony."

It didn't take long to turn the boat or to start rowing away from the land. But by that time the two Frenchmen had got their boat under weigh, and the other man had

jumped into another, and was sitting in the stern, while two more French fishermen took the oars.

“Keep her going,” cried Tony. “Don’t bother about steering: you’ll only stop her. We’d better go straight at first, and then try to get towards the mouth of the lake, over there. Then we can hop ashore on the farther side.”

“We’ve got to get there first, though,” muttered Peter, “and I don’t see how we’re going to do it. This boat’s jolly heavy.”

“Better not waste your breath then,” said Tony. “Get farther out, and we’ll probably catch some current.”

But by the time they were a hundred and fifty yards from the shore, the sea became choppy and the tide came full against their bows. Peter pulled frantically, though a trifle wildly, while Tony set his teeth and did his utmost to keep the boat’s head straight to the waves. Yet, in spite of everything, the following boats seemed to gain, so that it appeared that they were bound to be over-

taken long before they reached the opposite shore.

"Is the tide . . . coming in . . . or going out?" Tony gasped.

"Going out," Peter answered; "at least it was an hour ago."

"All right," said Tony. "Then let's go with it. Get your scull out of the water, Peter." And then he pulled round the head of the boat so that instead of struggling against the tide, they were carried straight toward the narrow mouth of the lake and the sea beyond.

"We don't want to go out to sea," cried Peter, but Tony declared that it wouldn't matter. "Just go on pulling," he said. "Pull for all you're worth. There won't be half so much current when we are out of the narrows, and then we'll be able to row ashore."

They were certainly moving much more quickly now—but so, for the matter of that, were the two boats that turned and followed them. But soon they came within twenty yards of the narrowest part of the mouth,

and there the current caught them and carried them forward so that they rapidly began to gain on their pursuers.

“ Hurrah ! ” cried Tony, “ we’re doing it.”

“ We’d better get over towards the other side, though,” said Peter, and he began to pull the boat’s head round till she was broad-side on to the current.

“ Look out, you ass,” called Tony, “ you’ll have her over ” ; and certainly for the moment they had completely lost control, as the boat hurtled sideways in the swiftly moving water. Peter did his best to back water, but the boat would not turn ; and then suddenly Tony, who was looking out to sea as he struggled with his scull, cried : “ Look out. There’s something sticking up out of the water.”

There was no doubt about what it was—a sharp point of rock directly in the middle of the narrowest part of the mouth of the lake. And without a doubt the boat in another minute would be dashed against it.

Tony stood up, his scull held before him like a spear, as he decided to try to ward off the rock in the hope that the boat would thus slip past it. Peter came to his aid, but before he could do anything, the side of the boat crashed into the rock, and as the blade of Tony's scull was crushed between rock and boat, Tony felt himself dragged out of the boat and carried across the rock into the water.

He let go of the scull as he fell, and struck out with arms and legs, but his clothes weighed him down, while the current carried him every second farther and farther towards the sea. He shouted for help, but the only result was that he swallowed a large mouthful of water. Impossible to swim against such a stream, and already the heavy clothes were dragging him down.

" Help ! " he cried again. " Help ! help ! "

CHAPTER XXII

RESCUE

PETER, seeing Tony carried into the water, could do nothing. He had but a single scull, and as the boat at last slipped past the rock he found that water was coming in through a hole in her side. In another minute she would founder and he, like Tony, would be in the water.

As quickly as he could, he pulled off his coat and began to unlace his boots. It seemed his only chance. But at that moment a hand grasped the gunwale of the boat, and without waiting to realise that to do so meant the certainty of capture, he jumped into the rescuing boat. And there he found himself looking up into the eyes of his father!

“Pater!” he cried in amazement, but Mr. Munday had nothing to say at that

moment to him. His eyes, though he clasped Peter's hand and pressed it, were on the water where Tony was still struggling.

The two Frenchmen at the sculls pulled their boat forward, and then Mr. Munday, letting go of Peter, dived. He swam to Tony, grasped him by the collar just as he was going under, and managed to hold him up till the boat was pulled alongside. Then he and Tony were at last dragged safely aboard.

That evening, Mr. Munday, Peter, and Tony gathered in Tony's room at the hotel. Tony was in bed, but it seemed certain by now that after a day or two he would be none the worse for his adventure.

"And now," said Mr. Munday, "suppose you tell me all about it."

At that moment there was a knock on the door, and as it opened in response to Mr. Munday's "Come in," Mr. Ratleigh entered. He was wearing an old dressing-gown that was considerably too large for

him, and he still looked decidedly ill ; but Peter felt extremely glad to see him at that moment.

For a second no one spoke. Then, " Mr. Ratleigh ! " the boys' father exclaimed. " I don't understand."

" Nor do I," said Mr. Ratleigh. " Not at all. Not at all. But I am extremely glad that you are here, sir, and that my responsibility is at an end. I have had the greatest fear for some days that these boys would be captured by the authorities before I was able to find you."

" Captured ? " Mr. Munday repeated. " But nobody wanted to capture them."

" Oh yes," put in Peter. " There were notices all over the place about us, offering a reward, you know."

Mr. Munday turned suddenly to Mr. Ratleigh. " Did you read those notices ? " he demanded.

" No," Mr. Ratleigh answered, " I didn't. But the boys told me . . ."

" I see," said Mr. Munday. " I see."

"Is this all a mistake?" said Mr. Ratleigh. "Is it——"

"I think it is certainly very much of a mistake," answered Mr. Munday. "You, Mr. Ratleigh, are the very last person I expected to see, and I still don't understand how you are here. I knew, of course, that Tony had taken advantage of the unfortunate accident by which I lost the train, and that his sense of adventure had made him try to live by himself—or rather with Peter—instead of coming on to Concarneau. Then a rumour reached me that some Englishman had been seen living mysteriously in a valley near L'Aunay, and although I failed to see any connection with my boys, I felt bound to come and investigate. But by the time I arrived, I learned that the Englishman had escaped. I was told that there were two boys with him, and of course I guessed that they must be you. I hadn't the slightest idea who the mysterious Englishman could be, but I am afraid I didn't bother very seriously about him. I had lost the

trail again, and I must say that I was exceedingly worried. It doesn't matter very much, now that the boys are found, but I certainly fail to understand what you have been doing, Mr. Ratleigh.

"Of Tony I would believe anything, and I know that Peter always follows his brother's lead. But that you, Mr. Ratleigh, should allow, and apparently even encourage, the boys to behave so foolishly—that is entirely beyond me."

"But," said Tony from his bed, "it wasn't foolish. We had to hide, you know. Bound to have been caught if 'Rats' hadn't helped us."

"A great pity you were not caught," answered his father. "That is what I am trying to tell you. And who, pray, do you mean by 'Rats'?"

Tony nodded at Mr. Ratleigh.

"Oh," said his father, "you mean Mr. Ratleigh, do you? Very well. Then you say that Mr. Ratleigh prevented you from being caught. I really don't see that it was

Mr. Ratleigh's business to do that. Your mother is quite distracted, and personally—well, at any rate, I have had enormous trouble, expense, and, above all, worry."

"A most unfortunate mistake from the beginning," said Mr. Ratleigh. "I can assure you that I never felt more sorry in my life. If only I had seen the posters myself, things would have been different."

"But, Pater," said Tony, "we didn't know where you were, and when we saw those posters we knew that we'd have to cut and run. Have got into prison if we hadn't, you know."

"Prison?" Mr. Munday repeated. "What on earth for?"

"Tying up that porter chap," Tony explained. "We got locked up in a cellar, you know, because we hadn't any tickets and passports. And then——"

"My dear boy," said Mr. Munday, "I know all about that. The porter—who, as a matter of fact, was an inspector of tickets and quite a superior person—told me the

whole story. He was exceedingly angry with you, and it cost me twenty pounds to pacify him and make him promise to say no more about it. I had, of course, to square the gendarme, too, and one or two other people."

"Do you mean," said Peter, "that he went back on you after he'd got your money? Jolly poor sport, that!"

"Of course not," was the answer. "I think, though, that I am beginning to see daylight. I had better tell you the whole story from my own point of view. Really it was very simple.

"When I was left behind and I saw your train going on, with you two boys both looking out of the window, I imagined that you would have the sense to pull the communication cord. I therefore waited at the station for news. But an hour later I learnt that the train had gone past the next important station, and then I knew that whatever you were going to do, that wasn't it. I therefore went to the telegraph office and wired to every

stationmaster along the line to Vannes, asking that the train should be searched and that if two English boys named Munday were found, they should be detained till my arrival. Perhaps I worded it rather carelessly. Of course I didn't mean by 'detained' that you were to be imprisoned, but that apparently is what the officials at that particular station understood. I imagine that they couldn't understand a word of what you said, and asked for your *cartes d'identité* in order to make certain that you were English and that your name was Munday, for that was all the description I had given them.

"Anyhow, they appear to have made up their minds about you and then to have locked you in that cellar, from which you unfortunately escaped. Meanwhile, they had wired to me, and I arrived to find two officials returning from a fruitless effort to recapture you. I settled them as I have told you, and then I had that whole district searched until I was quite sure that by some means or other you had left it. It occurred to me that you

had probably boarded a passing train, and then I discovered the route of the only train that passed where you were last seen at about that time. Then I had the posters printed."

"*You* did?" cried Peter, while Tony suddenly sat up in bed in amazement. "Do you mean to say that they were your posters and not about our going to prison after all?"

"Of course," said his father. "I had the posters sent out by arrangement with the French authorities, which resulted in their being put into official form, which probably helped to deceive you. Anyhow, I offered a reward that was large enough to tempt the local French townspeople to go out and look for you, and then, of course, there was little to do but to await reports.

"It was the effect of those posters that set people looking for you in L'Aunay, and brought me the first news of you. But after that, as I have said, I lost the trail. Then a message was brought to me that an English

tourist had seen you here. He said that he had done his best to stop you . . .”

“He certainly did that,” Peter put in.

“But,” Mr. Munday continued, “you had broken away from him and escaped. Of course I came here by the next train, and then the authorities told me that a fisherman’s boat had been taken from the harbour, and I suspected that you were the culprits. I was a little mystified as to what had happened to your companion, who now seemed to have disappeared . . .”

“A chill,” Mr. Ratleigh interrupted — “a very severe chill, which has confined me to bed in this hotel for the last two days.”

“I see,” said Mr. Munday. “Well, to continue: when I came here, I had to wait for daylight. This morning I was hardly out of bed when some one came rushing in with the news that you had been seen in a boat on the inland sea. I ran down to the quay, and got there just after the owner of the boat had started in pursuit of you. I

had a second boat launched, and . . . well, really there is no more to tell. I was exceedingly lucky in catching you just in time to save Tony from being drowned. For the rest, well, I think you, Mr. Ratleigh, behaved extremely rashly in trusting to the boys' knowledge of French, and not reading the posters yourself; but as I started the whole thing in Paris by showing trust in much the same way, I cannot say very much about that. And I must say that apart from that, you appear to have stood by the boys in a way which I thoroughly appreciate. For the effort, at any rate, I would like to thank you."

"Not at all, not at all," "Rats" answered, looking extremely uncomfortable. "I'm afraid I made a fool of myself."

"Rather not," cried Tony. "And I say, it really was the most awful sport."

"Perhaps," said his father. "Perhaps, for most of the time. But all the same I sincerely trust that you will never seek that sort of adventure again."

“ I know I didn’t enjoy the last part,” said Peter.

“ No,” Tony agreed. “ No, not that bit. Still, jolly good fun, all the rest of the time. I say, shan’t we have a yarn to tell the fellows at school ? ”

